The study of the question of why Shakespeare's Hamlet delays killing Claudius in revenge for his father's murder is examined in light of the major critical theories from neo-classical to modern scholarship. An expanded treatment of the works of Fredson Bowers, Eleanor Prosser, Bertram Joseph, and Roland Frye, is provided to examine the Elizabethan background of social, political, and religious values. The experience of passionate revenge on the human psyche of the revenger is addressed through an ancillary approach provided through the works of the Freudian analyst Ernest Jones and the psychoanalytic theory of Avi Erlich. The purpose of this study is to review the relevant theories of Hamlet's delay, and to apply the wisdom gleaned from such an examination so as to create a synthesis that may best answer the question of why Hamlet delays.
This study suggests that, although the various and sometimes contradictory critical theories of Hamlet's delay provide invaluable insights into the nature and meaning of Shakespeare's hero, no one explanation can reasonably account for Hamlet's delay throughout the entire action of the play. This study will try to show that Hamlet is a theatrical composite exhibiting various complex human dimensions, delaying the killing of Claudius at different times, for different reasons, in his progress toward self-knowledge.
Hamlet's Delay: An Attempt At Synthesis

by

Martin Cohen

A Thesis

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.
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DEDICATION

To My Father,

who at 88 years old

is still teaching me

about courage

and just how precious life is.
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Hamlet's Delay: An Attempt at Synthesis

Hamlet is a name: his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet. (Hazlitt, 1817)

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

A survey of the literature on Shakespeare's Hamlet alerts us to the great attention paid by critics to what is termed Hamlet's delay. What is being referred to as "delay" are Hamlet's actions from the time Hamlet hears the Ghost's commands for revenge to the play's ending. The questions then are, "Does Hamlet delay?" and, "If he does delay, why does Hamlet delay?" Although the belief that Hamlet delays is not the only assumption that is made to account for the duration of the action, this study will address those approaches to the play that presume so.

"According to most critics," claims John W. Draper, "the crucial question in the tragedy is the reason for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder" (165). This is echoed by Norman N. Holland when he summarizes Freud's psychoanalytical argument for the delay: "The basic issue of the play Freud and Jones say (and so, they point out, do many literary critics) is: Why does Hamlet delay?" (164). Edmund Wilson declares, "The problem of delay is a commonplace of Hamlet criticism" (201). It would be fair to assume that to understand why Hamlet delays is to understand much of what Shakespeare
had in mind to convey to his audience about his hero. What we learn about delay, or human motivation, or the limits of human action, are among the important messages of the play. Even testing the Ghost's story, which moves the action forward until Hamlet connects with Claudius' conscience in the play scene, is but a vehicle to debate Hamlet's possible procrastination. And so his madness, his "antic disposition," is also a component to get at the larger issue of delay. Wilson points out that we witness Hamlet's strange behavior even before we are aware of the delay. While the problem of Hamlet's madness is "technically associated" with the delay, it is "dramatically distinct" from it, and Wilson says that although the last two and a half acts are not "devoid of incident," Hamlet's delay is their predominant interest (203). Although the play contains what Northrop Frye refers to as many "minor problems" (On Shakespeare 84), Wilson tells us that the King at prayers, the slaying of Polonius, Hamlet's treatment of Gertrude, the madness of Ophelia, her funeral and struggle at graveside, among others, form for the most part a series of detached episodes; only a few of them contribute to the mechanism of the main plot; and, though they are exciting in themselves, none except the fencing-match and what leads up to it is felt to be central. A great question overshadows them all, until the final scene: When will Hamlet exact just retribution from his uncle? and why does he not do so? (203-04)

Ernest Jones believes that the "central mystery" of the play, "namely the meaning of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for his father's murder--has well been called the Sphinx of modern Literature" (22). He briefly
mentions many of the critical approaches that this mystery has produced. These hypotheses are categorized from a denial of any delay at all to the "box office" view that in order for the play to have a decent length, the murder must be delayed until the end. The three most important approaches explaining the delay, he says, hinge on [1] something in Hamlet's character or constitution "which is not fitted for effective action of any kind," [2] the task itself "which is such as to be almost impossible of performance by any one," and [3] some "special feature" of the task that makes it "peculiarly difficult or repugnant" to Hamlet's sensitivity and temperament (26). It would seem a necessity to accurately identify the cause of the delay in Shakespeare's hero, "for the very essence of tragedy is adequacy of motivation in the main course of the plot" (Draper 165) so as to separate it from melodrama.

The first approach mentioned by Jones was made famous by Goethe in his often quoted "costly vase" passage describing Hamlet's fragility. This view of the play as a tragedy of the intellect, where character is determined by inner motivations, was elaborated by Coleridge and Schlegel. They saw Hamlet as excessively reflective and thinking "too precisely" on the matter to carry out the event. The second view finds the difficulty of the task so overwhelming that Hamlet can only delay the deed. The position espoused by Werder points to the external barriers to accomplishing the task that would discourage even the most determined. The revenge task as conceptualized by Werder requires Hamlet not merely to slay Claudius, but also to bring him to public justice for his crime.
For Jones, the cause for Hamlet's delay is in the third category, "namely in some special feature of the task that renders it repugnant to him" (45). He argues that Hamlet is never unclear about what his duty is, "about what he ought to do; the conflict in his mind ranged about the question why he could not bring himself to do it" (48). It is the unconscious nature of the cause of his repugnance to his task that holds the key to Hamlet's problem of delay. Jones points out Hamlet's own words in his seventh soliloquy to this effect: "I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't" (4.4.35-38).² Hamlet suffers from an Oedipal complex or fixation: the unconscious desire to kill his father and marry his mother. Jones argues, "Hamlet's advocates say he cannot do his duty, his detractors say he will not, whereas the truth is that he cannot will" (53). Hamlet's lack of will pertains only to the killing of his uncle and is "due to an unconscious repulsion against the act that cannot be performed" (53).

This study will attempt to bring together what are believed to be the relevant, and often conflicting, interpretations of the play that presume delay into a synthesis that most comprehensively accounts for Hamlet's delay in taking revenge for his father's murder. By stacking, combining, integrating, and rejecting various theories of why Hamlet delays killing his uncle, what may be gained is a polyphony, a more harmonious view of Hamlet's problem. This will involve placing the hero in an Elizabethan context, analyzing Hamlet's character as a function of that milieu, along with his method of dealing with,
what is for him, a paradoxical and dangerous task. Although it is never possible
to know the precise intention of an artist as it pertains to his or her creation,
critics constantly strive to understand the meaning conveyed by the work.
Coleridge asks, "What did Shakespeare mean when he drew the character of
Hamlet?" (qtd. in Furness 154). He answers by asserting that artists never write
without first having a design; and in speaking of Shakespeare's design for
Hamlet he says, "My belief is, that he always regarded his story before he
began to write much in the same light as a painter regards his canvas before
he begins to paint: as a mere vehicle for his thoughts,--as a ground upon which
he was to work" (154). It is only by the challenging, and at times dissonant task
of discovering Shakespeare's design that we can hope to understand the
significance of Hamlet's delay. At first glance this project may appear as elusive
as Hamlet's own ability to understand why he does not take his revenge;
however, by providing an adequate account of the complexities involved in the
human dynamic, it is hoped that this study will become a viable work. In
addition, the study will endeavor to bring together what may seem to be
contrasting, and at times contradictory theories into a coherent whole, that, in
its gestalt, is somehow greater than the sum of its parts.

This study suggests that, although the different theories of Hamlet's
delay provide invaluable insights into the nature and meaning of Shakespeare's
hero, no one explanation can reasonably account for Hamlet's delay throughout
the entire action of the play. The study will try to show that Hamlet is a
theatrical composite exhibiting various complex human dimensions, and that he
delays the killing of Claudius at different times, for different reasons, in his
progress toward self-knowledge.
Hamlet himself has caused more of perplexity and discussion than any other character in the whole range of art. The charm of his mind and person amounts to an almost universal fascination; and he has been well described as "a concentration of all the interests that belong to humanity." I have learned by experience that one seems to understand him better after a little study than after a great deal. (Hudson 1870)

Chapter II

THE CRITICAL PROBLEM: A BRIEF HISTORY

Neo-Classical Criticism

It's a curious fact that for the first hundred and thirty-five years after the production of Shakespeare's Hamlet, there is no mention of Hamlet's delay in any of the scholarly criticism of the play. John Jump, in his essay "Hamlet," tells us that Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, published anonymously in 1736 and attributed to Thomas Hanmer, is the first detailed critical study of the play where an analysis of delay is present. Interestingly, before the appearance of this piece, "play-goers and readers seemed not to have suspected Hamlet of procrastinating" (147). Hanmer says pointedly:

Had Hamlet gone right to work, as we could suppose such a Prince to do in parallel Circumstances, there would have been an End of our Play. The Poet therefore was obliged to delay his Hero's Revenge: but then he should have contrived some good Reason for it. (qtd. in Jump 147-48)

Seventeenth-century scholarly criticism viewed Hamlet as "a bitterly eloquent and princely revenger" (Jump 147). It was in the middle of the eighteenth century that critics ascribed to him "a great delicacy and a more melancholy
temperament," but even they did not consider him to be "lacking in initiative and resolution" (147). Taking Hanmer's lead, scholars of the late eighteenth-century began to speculate about the "good Reason" Shakespeare may have "contrived" for Hamlet's delay. Their search resulted in discoveries in a variety of places.

Among the Neo-Classical critics, Samuel Johnson could serve as an excellent example of his period's approach to Hamlet. Johnson is primarily concerned with the actions of the character and the moral implications of those actions. Johnson says of Hamlet, "If the dramas of Shakespeare were to be characterized, each by the particular excellence which distinguishes it from the rest, we must allow the tragedy of Hamlet the praise of variety. The incidents are so numerous, that the argument of the play would make a long tale" ("Endnote to Hamlet" 7). He points out that Hamlet does little throughout the play to direct his revenge, and sees him as an "instrument," rather than an "agent," of his fate. He goes on to say that even after Hamlet is convinced that the King is guilty of killing his father, "he makes no attempt to punish him, and his death is at last affected by an incident which Hamlet has no part in producing" (Johnson on Shakespeare 1011). Johnson also comments on the seeming contradiction between Hamlet's noble character and his desire to see Claudius' soul "damn'd and black as hell" in the prayer scene: "This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would
punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered" (990). Along with its praise for the emotional diversity and theatricality of Shakespeare's play, this was a period that raised the issue of the playwright's failure to give an explanation for Hamlet's delay, which would occupy critical thought for the next hundred and fifty years.

**Romantic Criticism**

The crucial question, then, posed in the eighteenth-century and dominating nineteenth-century criticism of *Hamlet* was, "Why does Hamlet delay killing Claudius?" The answer for critics in this period came from the exploration of the inner world of Hamlet's personality. Goethe found it in Hamlet's delicate sensibility, presenting what has been subsequently looked upon as a sentimental image of "[a] beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, [that] sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off" (qtd. in Furness 273), subjected to an intolerable fate. His famous description, set down in his autobiographical novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), follows Hamlet's:

> The time is out of Joint: O cursed spite,  
> That ever I was born to set it right!

In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oaktree planted in a costly vase, which should have born only the pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered. (qtd. in Furness 15)
A.C. Bradley pointed out the inadequacy of casting Hamlet in the role of such "a costly vase" when he said "you can feel only pity not unmixed with contempt. Whatever else he is, he is no herd" (80). The sentimental view of Hamlet presents a character of a pure and noble nature but without the strength of character to form a hero. Goethe, nevertheless, calls our attention to an aspect of Hamlet's character, sweet and sensitive, that is, if not heroic, certainly admirable.

A.W. von Schlegel, in A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature (1808), found the reason for Hamlet's delay in the "hero's labyrinths of thought, in which we neither find end nor beginning" (qtd. in Furness 280). Schlegel, viewing tragedy as the conflict between man and his hostile universe, held Hamlet's highly intellectual character, with excessive reflection, as an exacerbation of this conflict, rendering him disabled for action. The play, in Schlegel's view, "is single in its kind: a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny . . . intending to show that a consideration, which would exhaust all the relations and possible consequences of a deed to the very limits of human foresight, cripples the power of acting" (qtd. in Furness 279). This view of the play as a tragedy of the intellect, where character is determined by inner motivations, was dominant throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth-century and best seen in Coleridge's elaboration of Schlegel's view. His is "easily the most influential criticism ever made about the play" and still the most "popular and prevalent conception of
[Hamlet’s] character" (Quinn 16). Some of Coleridge’s better known remarks describe Hamlet as possessing "a great, an almost enormous intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it," representing the "paralyzed intellectual" who cannot carry forth his revenge due to being excessively reflective and "thinking too precisely on the event" (qtd. in Furness 152-55).

In a letter to a Mrs. Clarkson (1812), Henry Crabb Robinson relates Coleridge’s stated moral of Hamlet: "Action is the great end of all. No intellect, however grand, is valuable if it draws us from action and leads us to think till the time of action is passed by and we can do nothing." Robinson pointedly adds, "Somebody said to me, `This is a satire on himself.' . . . `No,' said I, `it is an elegy'" (16-17). Coleridge himself confessed, "I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so," and shared with the philosopher prince of Denmark what Pralay Kumar Deb refers to as "a community of spirit" (73). This brings to mind T.S. Eliot’s remark that Coleridge "made of Hamlet a Coleridge" (Selected Essays 121). Accused by Eliot of projecting his own creative imagination (rather than Shakespeare’s) onto the subject, or at the very least, of reading more into the character of Hamlet than the text warrants, Coleridge is placed among those critics whose "minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. . . the most misleading kind [of criticism] possible" (121). One may take these statements as "evidence of the prevalent romantic stance (italics mine) of discovering a personal equation in a work of art . . ." (Deb 73).
With due respect to Eliot, it is not difficult to recognize the similarity of temperament and emotionality between the romantic artist and the part of Hamlet's personality that contemplated an ethereal universe. Deb describes the enormously complex influences exerted on the romantic artist originating in "his awareness of a universe alienated from human glories . . . liv[ing] in an unstable imaginative sphere, a lonely, diminished, fallen angel, evolving an art of struggle and anguish in pursuit of a timeless ideal" (74). Eliot regards Coleridge as a "real corrupter," a supplier of opinion or fancy rather than facts, and raises the question whether Coleridge's criticism of _Hamlet_ was "an honest inquiry as far as the data permit," or "an attempt to present Coleridge in an attractive costume?" ("Function of Criticism" 21-22). Whether one can devise a true test to resolve such a rhetorical stance is open to conjecture, what can be emphasized is that Coleridge had made a consistent attempt to analyze Hamlet's internal world. What Coleridge did cloak himself with was Hamlet's self-created, subjective world of intellectual brooding, vivid imaginings, and uncompromising idealism that also characterized the sensibility of the romantic artist. This writer is not convinced that Coleridge's criticism of _Hamlet_ is simply a case of projecting his creative imaginings, as Eliot insists, onto the character of Hamlet, rather than revealing a spiritual camaraderie or true _esprit de corps_.

In any case, the more important point is that here is yet another instance of an influential critical theory providing additional insight into the meaning of Shakespear's hero, but not accounting for Hamlet's delay in its entirety.
Coleridge has been criticized for following a too narrow psychological path, where Hamlet's entire motivation is directed from his inner life. According to this view, Coleridge gives little consideration to how external events in the play affect Hamlet's internal motivation, which results in the "reductio ad absurdum of Romantic criticism: the Prince of Denmark without Hamlet" (Quinn 17).

Karl Werder, in *The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery* (1875), saw Hamlet's difficulty in performing his duties at the opposite extreme from character analysis. He viewed him as a man capable of doing his duty, but inhibited by causes external to himself. Hamlet, in Werder's view, does all that can be expected of a revenge-hero to accomplish an impossible task. Speaking of Hamlet's challenge, Werder remarks, "Whether or not he was naturally capable of doing it is a question altogether impertinent. For it simply was not possible, and this for reasons entirely objective. The situation of things, the force of circumstances, the nature of his task, directly forbid it . . ." (qtd. in Furness 354). Werder believes it would be impossible for Hamlet to justify his deed to the court and people on the word of a ghost. Would there not have been an uprising "at once against Hamlet," Werder asks, "as the most shameful and impudent of liars and criminals, who, to gratify his own ambition, had wholly without proof, charged another, the King, with the worst of crimes, that he might commit the same crime himself?" (356).

To account for the delay, Werder sees Hamlet's "real" task as "not to crush the King at once,—he could commit no greater blunder—but to bring him to
confession, to unmask and convict him: this is his first, nearest, inevitable duty."

(357). He goes on to explain that

[w]hat Hamlet has nearest at heart, after the Ghost appeared to him, is not the death, but, on the contrary, the life, of the King, henceforth as dear to him as his own life! These two lives are the only means whereby his task is to be accomplished. Now that he knows the crime, now that he is to punish it, nothing could happen to him worse than that the King should die, unexposed, and so escape justice! . . . To a tragical revenge there is necessary, punishment, to punishment justice, and to justice the vindication of it before the world. And therefore, Hamlet's aim is not the crown, nor is it his first duty to kill the King; but his task is to justly punish the murderer of his father, unassailable as the murderer is in the eye of the world, and to satisfy the Danes of the righteousness of this procedure. This is the point. (357-58)

Hamlet was seen not as the procrastinator of Goethe and Coleridge, but rather a dynamic hero with the impossible task of bringing the murderer to justice.

Quinn calls Werder's work "remarkable in its anticipation of a prominent twentieth-century view of the problem of Hamlet's delay" (19).

One of the most prominent scholars of Shakespearean criticism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was A.C. Bradley. His comprehensive critical treatment of Hamlet in Shakespearean Tragedy (1904) traces the historical stage criticism of the play, analyses the characters of Claudius, Gertrude, and Ophelia as well as Hamlet's character, and presents a theory for Hamlet's delay grounded in melancholic disgust and apathy rendering him incapable of action.

In his discussion of Shakespeare's tragic period, Bradley relates Julius Caesar to Hamlet. "Both Brutus and Hamlet are highly intellectual by nature and
reflective by habit" (63). Calling them "good" men who, when placed in "critical circumstances," exhibit "a sensitive and almost painful anxiety to do right" (63), he says that their failure to deal successfully with their respective situations is rather due to their "intellectual nature and reflective habit than with any yielding to passion" (82). Thus, both plays may be considered "tragedies of thought," whereas Bradley attributes the tragic failures of Lear, Timon, Macbeth, Antony, and Coriolanus to bouts of "passion." Bradley contends that moral evil "is not so intently scrutinised or so fully displayed" in the two earlier works (64).

Shakespeare does not occupy himself with the more extreme form of evil, which "assumes shapes which inspire not mere sadness or repulsion but horror and dismay" (83), which he is directed by in Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. He makes the point that it is Hamlet's character that is the cause of the delay. He says that Laertes and Fortinbras, both in parallel situations of having their fathers slain, and both bent on revenge, show a great contrast in character to Hamlet: "For both Fortinbras and Leartes possess in abundance the very quality which the hero seems to lack, so that, as we read, we are tempted to exclaim that either of them would have accomplished Hamlet's task in a day" (71).4

In tracing historical stage criticism, Bradley says that most spectators have never questioned Hamlet's character or what caused him to delay. Bradley reiterates that it was not until 1730 that Hanmer remarked that "there appears no reason at all in nature why this young prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible" (qtd. in Bradley 71). Bradley counters, "[B]ut it does not
even cross [Hanmer's] mind that this apparent 'absurdity' is odd and might possibly be due to some design of the poet" (71). Hanmer explained the "absurdity" by saying that if Hamlet followed his nature, the play would have ended at the beginning. Bradley points out that "Johnson, in like manner, noticed that 'Hamlet is, through the whole piece, rather an instrument than an agent,' but it does not occur to him that this peculiar circumstance can be anything but a defeat in Shakespeare's management of the plot" (72). Rejecting the obvious criticism of Shakespeare's stage-craft, but more so, the dismissal by critics of the importance of character, Bradley refers to Henry Mackenzie, the author of _The Man of Feeling (1780)_ , as the first critic to aim at discerning Shakespeare's intention: "We see a man," Mackenzie wrote, "who in other circumstances would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct" (qtd. in Bradley 72). 

For Bradley the central question of delay can be attributed to Hamlet's character. Bradley espouses the theory that Hamlet, shaken by his mother's indiscretions by so quickly forsaking his father's memory and hastily marrying his uncle, had lapsed into "a boundless weariness and a sick longing for death" (96). He is already stricken with a disabling malady even before he is commanded by the Ghost to kill Claudius. Hamlet is afflicted with a condition of melancholic apathy, or what modern psychiatry might label a full blown clinical depression that renders him incapable of taking action. According to Bradley,
Hamlet's fears that the Ghost may be an evil specter, and his religious reasons for refusing to kill his uncle at prayers, are no more than rationalizations. Hamlet, himself, does not understand why he delays, and he continually tries to justify to himself why he does not act. Although Bradley has been accused of over-burdening the concept of character, and of not considering Elizabethan thought or Shakespeare's stage, "it is clear that he represents the last great, possibly the greatest, expression of the nineteenth-century view of Shakespeare as the master creator of character" (Quinn 23).

Hamlet does come to what Nietzsche termed "understanding," which leads to a recognition of the absurdity of his attempt to set things right. Nietzsche's interesting insight that Dionysiac man resembles Hamlet in principle, as the "dark, mysterious, irrational agent of the will" (Quinn 20), appears in his essay on the origins and nature of Greek tragedy, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). He says,

> both have looked deeply into the nature of things, they have understood and now are loath to act. They realize that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things, and they regard the imputation as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is out of joint. Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion; such is Hamlet's doctrine, not to be confounded with the cheap wisdom of John-a-Dreams, who through too much reflection, as it were a surplus of possibilities, never arrives at action. What, both in the case of Hamlet and of Dionysiac man, overbalances any motive leading to action, is not reflection but understanding, the apprehension of truth and its terror. (51-52)

This attainment of "truth," or seeing through the "veil of illusion," is an intellectual doctrine in opposition to Schegel's Romantic version. In Nietzsche's
view, Hamlet is no longer encumbered by his intellectual wanderings (his veil lifted) which served to delay his killing Claudius—Schlegel holding that Hamlet never arrives at action because he is endlessly consumed by an intellectual search for understanding. According to Nietzsche, it is the very intellectual act of understanding (that taking action in the world is pointless) that keeps Hamlet from his revenge. Hamlet expresses his attainment of truth by unmasking his "veil of illusion" to Horatio in his "divine grace" speech when he says, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will--" (5.1.9-10). Hamlet comes to understand that no action he can take will change God's eternal plan. In the end, Hamlet chooses to be God's agent, accepting His providence, and waits in readiness for divine guidance to accomplish his revenge.

In contrast to Nietzsche, Joseph Quincy Adams, in his edition of Hamlet (1929), characterizes Hamlet as an idealist who does not understand or accept the shortcomings of humankind. Hamlet, in Adam's view, becomes disillusioned with the human condition and, as a result, becomes melancholic and thus unable to act. Adams holds that "Shakespeare lays heavy emphasis on the binding nature of revenge; it is a duty, a sacred obligation" (211). He goes on to define precisely what renders the play's hero helpless in the face of action: "Hamlet is overcome with an utter sickness of soul that makes all effort impossible for him... . . . In other words, he is again sinking into melancholia" (218-19). It is Hamlet's mental disease, with its general condition of depression,
that causes him great difficulty making a decision and summoning the energy to act to accomplish his task. We can see much of Bradley's theory of melancholy as the cause of Hamlet's delay in Adams' work, but Adams expands and refines Bradley's thesis. For Adams, the climax of the play comes in the closet scene marking the beginning of Hamlet's recovery from melancholia. Although his recovery comes too late to save his life, he dies a soldier's death in pursuit of a noble cause.

**Historical Criticism**

The nineteenth-century preoccupation with the critical question, "Why does Hamlet delay killing Claudius?" was again being addressed in the twentieth-century, this time by a set of critics using an "historical" method of analysis. Simply asking the question, of course, presupposes that Hamlet delays, that he, himself, is the cause of the delay, and that he should kill Claudius in the first place.

A leading critic of the period, E. E. Stoll, challenged the assumption of delay as a creation of the Romantic critics and their entire critical approach to the play. He accused them of separating Hamlet from the play and Shakespeare's work from its contemporaries. In his *Hamlet: An Historical and Comparative Study (1919)*, he proposes studying "the technique, construction, situations, characters, and sentiments of the play in the light of other plays in which constructions, situations, characters, and sentiments appear" (1). Stoll
contends that the play is a product of the Elizabethan age and can only be understood as a reflection of the conventions and codes of that age. In his pragmatic reaction against the nineteenth-century conversion of "structure into psychology," Stoll argues that "the nineteenth-century had failed to see that Hamlet's delay--even his self-accusations--were merely donnees of the Elizabethan revenge play to be accepted, not analyzed" (Quinn 9). Delay, for Stoll, is just one of the many common elements found in all classical and Renaissance revenge tragedies. He regards Hamlet's delaying killing Claudius as a dramatic device to keep the audience's interest, and "[t]hroughout the play, indeed, the lead in the intrigue is taken not by the revenger but by the King. Claudius thrusts; Hamlet, in the main, but parries" (Stoll 5). Stoll attributes Hamlet's delay "merely to conventional dramatic necessity; for, if Hamlet had killed the King at once, there would have been no play" (Draper 165). There is no dark psychological motive, and delay would not occur as a problem to an audience involved in the swift stage action of the play. For all his important contributions, Stoll has been criticized as being reductive in his insistence on viewing Hamlet as primarily another revenge tragedy at the cost of recognizing those universal characteristics that make it a play for all time.

Like Stoll, Bertram Joseph, in his Conscience And The King (1953), views the play as a distinct product of its Renaissance milieu. He attempts to see the play from an Elizabethan standpoint and suggests that a playwright, of any period, "is often misunderstood unless his words, his situation and all they
imply are interpreted in accordance with the meaning which they can be shown
to have had for his contemporaries" (11). Joseph contends that Hamlet's delay
in killing his uncle, his entire manner of behavior as a Renaissance prince,
would have been acceptable to an Elizabethan audience. Hamlet's distressed
mental state, his melancholy at the beginning of the play, is a normal reaction
to "the particularly repulsive form which evil has taken in Denmark with a
hypocrite as King, and incest celebrated as holy matrimony, with no voice
raised in protest, but from all sides approbation" (103). The Elizabethan
audience, in Joseph's view, would have considered the grieving of a bereaved
son, cheated of his throne, and dishonored by a mother he dearly loved, a
normal reaction and understandably melancholic. Joseph says, "Here are no
seeds of hesitancy, this is not the breeding ground of an indecision and inability
to revenge" (104). He concludes that the more one knows about and
understands the attitudes and values of the civilization out of which
Shakespeare comes, the better the possibility of understanding Hamlet and the
appearance of delay.

An unusual, and highly interesting approach to delay in *Hamlet* was
taken by G.R. Elliot, in *Scourge and Minister: A Study of Hamlet as Tragedy of
Revengefulness and Justice* (1951). Also speaking in terms of an Elizabethan
Hamlet, Elliot saw the embodiment of Renaissance conscience as the cause of
Hamlet's delay. Elliot goes even further seeing Hamlet and Claudius equally
delaying the death of the other which results in each other's demise. The Play-
within-the-play confirmed Claudius' guilt in Hamlet's eyes, and convinced
Claudius that Hamlet knew he killed his father. Elliot maintains that "both men
had been summoned by their opposite fates to take definitive action; and both
had failed to do so" (xvi). He goes on to say that the underlying motives for
both characters' delays "[are] an ungodly but true human mixture of ambitious
pride and obscure conscience" (xviii). Hamlet recoils from killing Claudius
because of his "respect for the kingship . . .[that] makes him hate to do what his
uncle has done: assassinate the sovereign of the realm" (xxii). According to
Elliot, Hamlet admits "the essential cause of his procrastination has all along
been `conscience' (5.2.68) . . . [b]ut his `mind's eye' (1.2.185), otherwise so
keen, was blinded to that awe by his proud, personal, revengeful hatred of the
new incumbent of that office" (xxiii). Elliot makes a distinction between "black,
faltering, revengefulness" (evident in the prayer scene) and "righteous revenge"
(Hamlet assuming the moral posture as God's minister in the duelling scene for
the task of executing the king). As Elliot so aptly puts it: "In the first act
Claudius certainly deserves to be killed; but only in the last act does Hamlet
deserve to kill him" (xxv). Although Hamlet's pride is the source of his problem
throughout the play, he finally achieves the mind-set to kill the king in `perfect
conscience' as an act of impersonal justice, taking his "punishment" as
heaven's "scourge and minister." Elliot disagrees with Bradley's concept that the
play is a character study and claimed, rather, that it embodies Renaissance
Christian humanistic thought.
In her justification for the historical approach, Helen Gardner, in *The Business of Criticism* (1959), took the position that although Elizabethans soundly condemned "murder [as] unethical and private revenge sinful" (37), the religious politics of preserving the Protestant reign of Elizabeth took precedence over God's prerogative. She views Hamlet as a man of "intellectual integrity and moral sensibility" (37), but has difficulty finding consistency between the fact of Hamlet's delay and the play's ending which strongly suggests that Hamlet departed well, successfully settling his score. To resolve this dilemma, Gardner falls back on the historical fact that Shakespeare did not invent the plot of *Hamlet*. She goes on to say that Shakespeare, himself, had to deal with what Bradley pointed out as Hamlet's "making a mess of things," as well as the "satisfaction" Johnson believed the audience feels at the end of the play (40). Gardner holds that the villain in the Renaissance revenge tragedies is the agent of his own destruction as well as the initiator of the action. Although the hero-revenger is cast in the role of waiting for the opportunity his victim will unintentionally provide, this does not answer the question "Why does Hamlet delay?" Hamlet is typical of the conventional revenge hero in that he has his waiting role, but "Hamlet's agony of mind and indecision are precisely the things which differentiate him from . . . the conscienceless and treacherous villain" (46) of the blood-revenge tragedy.
Recent Criticism

A highly original and somewhat clinical critical approach to Hamlet's delay based on Freudian psychoanalysis gained acceptance through the publication of an article in the *American Journal of Psychology* (1910). It was shaped by Ernest Jones, an English follower of Freud, into a fascinating psychological case-study. In his Bradleyan approach to Hamlet's inner world, Jones' thesis is that Hamlet suffers from an Oedipal complex or fixation: the unconscious desire to kill his father and marry his mother. The hypothesis, first suggested by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), gives the explanation for Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius as an unconscious identification with the murderer. For the sake of brevity, I quote Holland's apt summary of Freud's argument:

The basic issue of the play Freud and Jones say (and so, they point out, do many literary critics) is: Why does Hamlet delay? . . . Freud puts and answers the question rather neatly. (1) Critics, by and large, have been unable to say why Hamlet delays. (2) Clinical experience shows that every child wishes to murder his father and marry his mother. (3) Clinical experience also shows that this childish wish persists in the unconscious mind of the adult, and that wish and deed seem the same there. (4) Were Hamlet to punish Claudius for murdering his father and marrying his mother, he would have to punish himself as well. Therefore, he delays. (5) The wish in question is unconscious in all of us, and that is why the critics could not say why Hamlet delays. (Holland 164)

Jones, in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), outlined various traditional interpretations of Hamlet's delay, as discussed above. Jones placed the cause for Hamlet's delay "in some special feature of the task that renders it repugnant to him" (45). This approach, a "subjective" interpretation of the condition of mind, is close to
the Bradleyan method of analyzing the character of Hamlet by looking into his mind to explain his behavior. Hamlet, in Bradley's view, disgusted with the corruption of the world, the lies and betrayals he experiences by the ones he loves most, suffers a paralysis of will to act. Jones argued that it is the unconscious nature of the task that is repugnant to him, manifesting itself in the form of an Oedipal complex. The inability of the will to act, in Jones' view, is the key to Hamlet's delay. Jones' conclusion, albeit developed from the perspective of a professional psychoanalyst, bears a close resemblance to the paralysis of will brought on by the perceived disgust and apathy described by Bradley's conception of Hamlet's suffering.

Another important psychoanalytic study of Hamlet's delay evaluated Jones' work but took a different direction focusing on Hamlet's search for a strong father figure. Avi Erlich in *Hamlet's Absent Father (1977)* maintains that Hamlet's father was, for the most part, an absent parent, both physically and emotionally, throughout Hamlet's life, requiring Hamlet to search for a strong father figure with whom to identify. Erlich contends that Freud's attributing an Oedipal complex to Hamlet, resulting in Hamlet's identification with Claudius, is an unsatisfactory interpretation of Hamlet's delay in killing his uncle. Erlich argues that Hamlet's dilemma derives from him lacking a strong father in his life, rather than from any unconscious wish to kill that father. Erlich further tries to show that Hamlet wants his father back more than he wants to have been the one who killed him, that he is unable to acknowledge this because it means
accepting that his father was finally weak and victimized. On the conscious level, Hamlet must pretend that his father was strong and good, a "radiant angel," but on the unconscious level he has incorporated an image of a weak father who "steals away." This results in ambivalence, indecision, and a secret wish that his father kill Claudius himself and thereby give his son a clear model of purposeful action in the world (23).

Erlich points out that most literary and psychoanalytic critics see Hamlet's delaying the killing of Claudius in the prayer scene as simply another convenient rationalization. He counters this argument by asserting that by Hamlet's delaying Claudius's death he can "fantasize" a situation whereby he could trust God to do His work: "Hamlet does not act in the prayer scene, I think, because he unconsciously wants his father to act. He desperately needs a strong father who, like his punitive God, will damn Claudius to hell" (31).

An earlier work, less "scientific" but equally comprehensive in its description of the complexity of human nature and the elusive character of Hamlet is What Happens in Hamlet (1936) by Dover Wilson. The study describes a genuinely Elizabethan Hamlet. Wilson views Hamlet as a fictitious character and not a real person. It is also historical in that he sees the play from the perspective of the Elizabethan audience. Wilson supplies the reader with abundant detail of what life was like for an Elizabethan, reminding us how intensely aware Shakespeare's audience would have been of Claudius usurping the crown, Gertrude being guilty of incest, and that the Ghost might be an evil
spirit tempting Hamlet to his destruction. By insisting upon the ambiguous position of the ghost "at the end of the first act, the Elizabethan audience could no more be certain of the honesty of the Ghost . . . than the perplexed hero himself" (84). Wilson brings our attention to the external difficulties confronting Hamlet and argues that his delay is prudent up to a point. The issue of madness ["Hamlet assumes madness because he cannot help it." (92)] was seen by Wilson as a reason for delay and would "be accepted as a convenient disguise while he was maturing his plans" (92). Wilson holds that Shakespeare wants us to feel that Hamlet is, on the one hand, a simple procrastinator who is to be held accountable for shirking his duty, while at the same time, he contended that this same procrastination "is due to the distemper, is in fact part of it" (224). Wilson's emphasis on external factors placed in Hamlet's path, and his own procrastination, are presented in the light of the Elizabethan stage.

The "new historicism" approach to criticism, as it relates to Renaissance literature, has arisen as recently as the 1970s in England, and has brought a new vigor and enthusiasm to literary discourse. According to Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, leading spokesmen for the new historicism movement, "a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis offers the strongest challenge" to the study of the literary text in historical context (vii). They go on to say

[a] play by Shakespeare is related to the contexts of its production - to the economic and political system of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church).
Moreover, the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, for culture is made continuously and Shakespeare's text is reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific context. What the plays signify, how they signify, depends on the cultural field in which they are situated. (vii-viii)

Much of this work is primarily concerned with the "operations of power" (Dollimore 2), and the specific representation of power in Renaissance literature has come to be called new historicism. This perspective is concerned with the "interaction in this period between State power and cultural forms . . . for example, pastoral, the masque and the institution of patronage" (3). The essence of the approach is that one cannot separate art from social practice, nor can one identify a "single political vision . . . said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population" (Greenblatt in Dollimore 4).

According to new historicism, the dominant culture, modified and perhaps even replaced in part by emerging or marginal levels of cultural elements, is always a cultural diversity and never a unity.

Although new historicism argues for the understanding of literary structure as it relates to its historical context, and a noticeable body of Shakespearean work has already been formed under their banner, this writer has not been able to locate any new historicist criticism that makes specific reference to Hamlet's delay. Moreover, Paul Siegel, in "Hamlet's revenge!: The Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism" (1993) surveying the criticism on Hamlet's revenge cites fifty one major studies on the subject of Hamlet's delay. Interestingly, only four studies written since 1980 are mentioned. It appears
that we may have come full-circle from *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet* (1736) in that the most recent scholarly discussion of Hamlet's delay is conspicuous by its absence.

An enormous amount of criticism has been written on why Hamlet delays killing his uncle, and no single study or review will be able to present an exhaustive list or summary. However, any attempt to review the critical history of Hamlet's delay would need to include at least those studies that exhibit the major trends and theories of the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Such a review needs to begin with the first essay that dealt critically with the play which was published anonymously (1736) and attributed to Thomas Hanmer, since it was evidently the first study to bring Hamlet's delay to the attention of the play-goer and scholar. Eighteenth-century scholarly criticism generally viewed Hamlet as an honorable and princely revenger. Dr. Johnson had great admiration for *Hamlet*, but also grave reservations in terms of neoclassical principles of structure and poetic justice. There was praise for the play's variety and theatricality, but it was also a period that failed to provide an answer for Hamlet's delay in killing the King.

The nineteenth-century Romantic critics assumed that Hamlet's delay was consistent with his character. It was an age of exploration of the inner world of personality and lay-analysis. It made its most prominent mark with Goethe's enduring picture of Hamlet as a delicate vase, and with Coleridge's
most influential view of Hamlet as a paralyzed intellectual, a view that had lasted well into our own time. Although Coleridge, Goethe, and Schlegel dominated nineteenth-century thought with interpretations in which character and action are determined by inner motivation, there were dissenting voices. Werder took the opposite view arguing that Hamlet's delay was due to external events rather than from internal ones. He saw Hamlet's task as not merely revenging his father but bringing his father's murderer to public justice. Bradley pointed out the weaknesses in all these views and conceptualized one of his own based on a psychological malady very near our modern definition of clinical depression. Bradley saw Hamlet afflicted with a profound melancholic disgust and apathy brought on by his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle. Nietzsche's comparison of Hamlet to Dionysiac man, in his essay on the origins and nature of Greek tragedy, allowed him to emphasize the way both look deeply into the nature of things and as a result of understanding truth and its terror, they are loath to act. The psychological nature of Hamlet's "understanding," that no action he can take will change God's eternal plan, is explored in the inner recesses of man's psyche. We saw much of Bradley's theories in the work of Adams who characterizes Hamlet as an idealist who becomes so disillusioned with the human condition he cannot act.

Bradley's exploration of the inner man to locate the cause for Hamlet's delay, which became so influential with his contemporaries, met notable opposition from those proponents of historical criticism. The basic assumptions
of the Romantic period challenged by Stoll, Joseph, Elliot, and Gardner were
the abstracting of the character of Hamlet into an independent existence
separate from the play and the conversion of Elizabethan stage conventions
into psychological insights on the part of the play's characters. The historical
perspective accepted Hamlet's delay as part of the trappings, a dramatic
device, of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy and controlled by the codes and
conventions of that age. Contrary to the beliefs of Romantic critics,
psychological motivation was not a viable reason for Hamlet's delay, and delay
was not a problem for the audience caught up in the swift action of the play.

More recent criticism saw the Bradleyan view of character analysis taken
to its extreme: a psychoanalytical interpretation, initiated by Freud and refined
by his English disciple Ernest Jones. Bradley held that Hamlet, disgusted with
the corruption of the world, is afflicted with a condition of melancholic apathy
and therefore cannot act. He does not understand why he delays and tries to
justify his behavior to himself. Jones described the unconscious nature of the
task that is repugnant to Hamlet as an Oedipal complex and is the reason for
his delay. Erlich challenged Jones' Oedipal interpretation in which Hamlet
identifies with his uncle and said his condition stems rather from Hamlet lacking
a strong father in his life. Wilson has had a particular influence on modern stage
productions with his description of a genuinely Elizabethan Hamlet, which
emphasized the words and actions of the play that view Hamlet as a fictitious
character and not a real person. As Wilson so aptly put it, "Hamlet is a
character in a play, not in history. He is part only, if the most important part, of an artistic masterpiece, of what is perhaps the most successful piece of dramatic illusion the world has ever known" (218). Wilson's work, more flexible and critically eclectic than the historical approaches of Stoll and his followers, has led to a closer examination of the mysteries that enshroud Hamlet's delay.
CLAUDIUS

What would you undertake
To show yourself your father's son in deed
More than in words?

LAERTES

To cut his throat i' th' church.

CLAUDIUS

No place should murder sanctuarize;
Revenge should have no bounds.

(Hamlet 4.7.100-105)

Chapter III

THE SYNTHESES

Although the audience at the Globe Theater in or about the year 1600 may have at first echoed Horatio's incredulous comment, "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" (1.1.21) when faced with yet another crusty ghost to haunt the battlements of another revenge tragedy, they would soon be faced with an event both stately and majestic. The standard ghosts of the London stage before Hamlet were exemplified in A Warning for Fair Women, a play dating from about 1599, where we hear that

a filthy whining ghost, Lapt in some foul sheet or a leather pilch, Comes screaming like a pig half-stickt, And cries "Vindicta! revenge, revenge!" (qtd. in Roland Frye 25)

Thomas Lodge refers to a clearly Senecan ghost in Wit's Miserie (1596)

"cr[ying] so miserably at the Theator like an oister wife, "Hamlet revenge"" (qtd. in Wilson 56). The "thing" in question in Shakespeare's play, both mysterious and sinister, "conveys a dignity never before seen in a specter on the Elizabethan stage" (Frye 25). And a blood-revenge tragedy, in Shakespeare's
hands, was transformed into a theatrical event far surpassing any presented in that genre.

To understand the popularity of revenge tragedies, and the authors who ground them out with enthusiasm, we must look to how they appealed to their audience. Revenge tragedies in their traditional form were expected to be both melodramatic and exciting pieces of theater. The formula was laid out by Kyd and assiduously followed by the playwrights of the period. Fredson Bowers, in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, points out that revenge was taken quite seriously as "a criminal passion" (20) by the Elizabethans. Playwrights in their endeavor to create high tragedy presented their heroes as "normal persons caught up by demands often too strong for their powers and forced into a course of action which warps and twists their character and may lead even to the disintegration of insanity" (110). The appeal of the revenge tragedy, then, lies in two aspects of this dramatic passion. In the first, the universal perspective, the situation of revenge "provided an action that had the potential of raising the hero's story to tragic proportions" (Hallet and Hallet 6). Aeschylus' hero in *The Eumenides*, who is seeking to understand the meaning of his need to revenge while frustrated by the injustice of it all, "became for the playwrights an emblem of Man himself" (6). A second more particular aspect revealing the passion of revenge on the human psyche "provided a foundation for character delineation which is probably insurpassable" (6). The audiences were intrigued by the emotions produced by pressures exerted on the hero and responded to
the passionate changes created in human experience as it struggled with the burdens of revenge.

No matter how the audience of today, or the modern scholar for that matter, interprets the play, it remains an unique aesthetic experience and an endless source of enjoyment. It is because *Hamlet* is such an exceptional piece of art that it lends itself to a number of viable interpretations, encompassing both complimentary and contradictory viewpoints, and connects with what Prosser calls our "instinctive responses." But even if it is true that a contemporary audience may justifiably apply its own felt sense to the understanding of the play, influenced by the mores and values reflected in its culture, it does not change the fact that this is not the experience that happened for Shakespeare's audience. As T.A. Spalding pointed out in *Elizabethan Demonology*, (1880),

It is impossible to understand and appreciate thoroughly the production of any great literary genius who lived and wrote in times far removed from our own, without a certain amount of familiarity, not only with the precise shades of meaning possessed by the vocabulary he made use of . . ., but also with the customs and ideas, political, religious, and moral, that predominated during the period in which his works were produced. Without such information, it will be found impossible, in many matters of the first importance, to grasp the writer's true intent, and much will appear vague and lifeless that was full of point and vigour when it was first conceived; or, worse still, modern opinion upon the subject will be set up as the standard of interpretation, ideas will be forced into the writer's sentences that could not by any manner of possibility have had place in his mind, and utterly false conclusions as to his meaning will be the result. Even the man who has had some experience in the study of an early literature, occasionally finds some difficulty in preventing the current opinions of his day obtruding
themselves upon his work and warping his judgement; to the general reader this must indeed be a frequent and serious stumbling-block. (qtd. in Joseph 22)

Of course, the obvious problem in trying to restore an Elizabethan perspective is how to empty our heads of the contemporary mind-sets that drive us to interpret the play in terms of the events of our own time.¹⁰ There does not seem to be a satisfactory answer to this problem, except, perhaps, to try to bring the problem to the forefront of our awareness, at least temporarily, so that we can allow what we know about the Elizabethan period to permeate our sensibilities and affect our feelings in the same direction as the Shakespearean audience. Joseph reminds us that popular drama, whether in Shakespeare's day or our own, "deals with simple, clear-cut issues, easily perceived by ordinary people, who expect to be entertained in the theatre with plots that hold the attention, with characters who hold the interest, all organized in such a way that as the play progresses it is not difficult to trace a theme and to recognize implications which have a bearing outside the immediate context of the action" (25).

Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but there is wisdom in what Joseph says.

Another way of viewing the problem facing the theater-goer or scholar in his or her approach to the interpretation of the play is taken by Robert B. Schwartz when he talks about how Hamlet, playing a role (as an actor might), establishes a new context by simply playing the role. Schwartz points out that "what the observer should realize . . . is that his mode of observation creates new conditions that modify his point of view: that he only appears to be
observing what is happening, and that those events that follow the observation are in part conditioned by his presence" (124). In this sense, we cannot separate ourselves from our preconceived ideas and knowledge of the play; they become part of our "new" experience of the play, conditioned by our presence. It is true that we really have little control over how we are affected by a work of art, and we cannot disarm our emotional response that will in turn color our understanding of what we are seeing. It also makes sense that our sensibilities are affected by what we know, and as stated above, the more we can accept the perspective of an Elizabethan audience, the more we can be moved by the cultural and literary context in which Shakespeare wrote. Draper says that an adequate solution to the problem of Hamlet's delay must entail "some explanation that throughout the play must have been obvious to an Elizabethan audience and that Shakespeare emphasized in the dialogue" (187). Although Draper may be right in saying that the explanation must make sense to an Elizabethan audience, it is not clear how "obvious" the solution was even to them. Further, we might try to reserve judgment on the meaning of any particular event in Hamlet until we evaluate how an Elizabethan theater-goer might have responded, for although many of Shakespeare's themes transcend time, and contain universal genius for all time, Hamlet was written for the Elizabethan stage presumably with particular intentions in mind. It is one of the tasks of this study to attempt to bring some of those possible intentions to light.
Hamlet is an Elizabethan character, not a modern man. Shakespeare may have been a genius ahead of his time, and may have drawn Hamlet as a "medieval man teetering on the brink of the modern" (Prosser 250), but Hamlet was the product of a Renaissance mind created for the interest and enjoyment of an Elizabethan audience. Hamlet is a stage invention, not a human being; while literature, theater, and life may overlap, they are not one and the same thing. His character cannot be treated as part of a living person with a distinct history that can aid us in understanding his present behavior. Hamlet cannot be studied like a natural event, or a case-study of a dysfunctional syndrome. Specifically, Hamlet is the hero of a Elizabethan revenge tragedy, a popular genre of the period, and our task is to understand the nature of the blood-revenge tragedy as it was performed on the Shakesperean stage. This can best be accomplished by first examining the position the concept of blood-revenge occupied within Elizabethan ethical thought and practice.

Creating the Context: The Background of Blood-Revenge

The development of blood-revenge, which was universally present among primitive peoples, was very much alive during the Elizabethan period. Crime, as we know it today, did not exist before the establishment of laws and regulations by the State. Prior to these State conventions, to redress an injury inflicted upon one's person, "the only possible action for the primitive individual was a direct revenge upon his injurer" (3). Fredson Bowers, in Elizabethan
Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642, identifies this kind of act of violence not as a crime but as a "personal injury" and "the first manifestation of a consciousness of justice, for private revenge was the mightiest, the only possible form in which a wrong could be righted" (3). Revenge was a condition that Francis Bacon insightfully labelled "a kind of wild justice" (qtd. in Bowers 3).

In a society where "might makes right," if an individual was physically unable to strike back at his injurer, he remained without vengeance. With the growth of socialization and the formation of groups, a corresponding consciousness of "force to right" developed as it pertained to addressing one's injury. And when the family unit took hold under the heel of a severe patriarchal system, "the right to revenge was no longer a matter of choice, but a binding obligation" (4). The term "vendetta" was employed to describe a "true collective justice, which makes an obligation of a right," (4) and enforcement of the duty was charged to any member of the family to kill any other member of a murderer's family. Although revenge was still outside any formal legal system of justice, it remained as a duty to the nearest relative of the slain person to retaliate. "There is some power," says Bowers, "whether of military autocracy or of public opinion, which prescribes bounds" (4). These bounds, or prescription for a more standardized punishment of particular inflicted injuries, are placed within the laws of "talion," the biblical concept of "an eye for an eye," the suiting of the penalty to the offense. With the migration of the Germanic Anglo-Saxons to England, the concept of the vendetta incorporated a new aspect of the code
of blood-revenge: a system of *wergeld*. Kinsmen of the party responsible for an injury were offered the option of paying a reparation, with the family of the victim responsible for collecting this payment. The alternative was family warfare "known as *faehthe*, or feud" (4), and it was again the right, if not the obligation of the injured family, to exact revenge.

Feuding was brought to a halt by the growth in power of the monarchy demanding to share in the *wergeld*. As early as the late seventh-century, the King had a share of the damages based on the supposition that an offense against a subject was an offense against the State. Responsibility for the crime and payment of the *wergeld* gradually narrowed, and by the tenth-century, "the liability for a murder was fixed squarely on the shoulders of the slayer alone, and his kinsmen were allowed to repudiate the crime and their share of the *wergeld*" (6). Taking private revenge was considered an exclusive crime against the State and outlawed after the first half of the fourteenth-century.

The Norman code of state justice, brought by William the Conqueror, introduced the procedure of legal appeals to England. Through this procedure, the widow, or a male heir, could prosecute the victim's murderer. Although the appeals procedure abolished the *wergelt*, it "retained the spirit of the old blood-revenge, for the nearest of kin had to take up the suit against the murderer and frequently to fight it out with him in the direct revenge of judicial combat" (7). Murderers were given the option of trial by jury, but understandably, most murderers preferred judicial combat. This system of appeals was common
practice until the end of the fifteenth-century. To tighten-up the abuses of the system, Henry VII (1485-1509) put in place the indictment, where the accused murderer was given a speedy trial if sufficient evidence was presented to the court. Bowers informs us that "this indictment remained the legal method of prosecuting murderers in Elizabethan times, although the appeal was still known and in theory could be utilized" (8). The difference between the two procedures appears to be the private nature of the appeal, bringing to mind the days of legalized private revenge, whereas the indictment signifies the state system of justice operating today in England.

Although attaining justice no longer legally rested in the hands of the individual, but was the sole responsibility of the state, "the spirit of revenge had scarcely declined in Elizabethan times: its form was merely different" (8). Murder was still considered a personal affront to the family of the slain, and although severe punishment was meted out to anyone who took the law into his own hands, the taking of private revenge was not uncommon. Premeditated murder, murder with malice aforethought, was not tolerated as a legal remedy in Elizabethan England. Bowers states that "the only possible private retaliation at all countenanced was the instantaneous reaction to an injury, which was judged as manslaughter and a felony but which carried the possibility of royal pardon" (10). Since private revenge was considered a "retaliation," it was illegal.

Blood-revenge was unequivocally rejected by the legal system as a remedy for the punishment of a wrong; however, many Elizabethans rejected
"the interpretation of premeditated malice put by the law upon their revenge" (10) as well. The practice was evidently rampant enough for James I (1603-1625) to command, "Our louinge and faithful Subiectes . . . vpon payne of our highe displeasure . . . that from this tyme forwarde they presume not vpon their owne imagination and construction of wrong . . . to aduenture in any sorte to ryghte (as they call it) or to revenge (as the Lawe findes it) their own quarrels" (qtd. in Bowers 10-11). Revenge for the murder of a relative was considered a murder as any other murder with malice aforethought. Bowers points out that "no evidence can be found in Elizabethan law [that] allowed for motive or extenuating circumstances in any murder which was the result of such malice and premeditation as was owned by an avenger of blood" (11). It was because Elizabethans inherited private justice from an earlier time, a time of lawlessness when revenge was a right, that "they were determined that private revenge should not unleash a general disrespect for law" (11). Elizabethan justice meted out punishment to avengers who took the law into their own hands, just as it did to the original offender, to assure respect for English law.

With the establishment of a state system of justice, condemnation of private revenge clerics nd mor lists in ngl nd slowi found momentum until, "in the God-fearing Elizabethan age, it exercised a force second to none in the constant war against the private lawlessness of the times" (12). In a newly ordered Christian society the Mosaic laws, taken to legitimize blood-revenge in biblical terms, were being overthrown. Thomas Becon's (1560)
argument against revenge typified the moral climate: "To desire to be revenged, when all vengeance pertaineth to God, as he saith, 'Vengeance is mine, and I will reward . . . this to do ye are forbidden'" (qtd. in Bowers 13). With invoking the word of God as expressly forbidding private revenge, "it was only natural to believe damnation awaited those who disobeyed" (13). Many religious writers of the period denounced the idea that God could be favorable toward such a heinous enterprise and predicted "a double death, of body and of soul" (13) for the revenger. The moralist argued as well that a person's honor was decreased by the act of revenge, "since the honour that is wonne by her, hath an ill ground. . . . Honour is a thinge too noble of itself, to depend of a superfluous humour, so base and villainous, as the desire of vengeance is" (John Eliot in Bowers 14). Along with the loss of honor, the argument went, the mind of the revenger would also suffer torment and agony for the unjust deed.

There was always smoldering opposition to official efforts at reform. Violence and personal revenge flourished during the Middle Ages, a time when "royal justice was more a name than a power" (15). The blood-thirst for vengeance for slain relatives was rampant after the Wars of the Roses. This age of mass violence gave way in Tudor times to individual violent acts where "personal character, with its inheritance of fierceness and independence, had not changed" (16). The aristocracy, priding itself on its individuality, nourished redress by personal revenge: "Open assault and the duel were current practices, and for those too timid to take the law into their own hands there was no lack of private bravi ready to stab" (16). The shedding of blood in the streets
was not an uncommon occurrence as public executions were a familiar official function:

    The Elizabethan who attended public executions as an amusement was used to the sight of blood and would scarcely flinch from it on the stage. Rather, he would demand it, for he was keenly interested in murders for any other motive than simple robbery. Murder to expedite a theft was easily understandable, and the offender was promptly hanged; yet murder for different motives excited the Elizabethan audience’s curiosity. An essentially religious person, the Elizabethan regarded murder as the worst of all crimes--with death, to his Renaissance spirit, the ultimate disaster. (16)

The typical Elizabethan’s rationale for acceptance of a murder based on the passion of the moment can be attributed to the "characteristic English hatred of secrecy and treachery" which typifies acts of vengeance, and "[p]remeditated, secret, unnatural murder . . . struck a chord of horror" (17). Although this tradition of "fair play" was reinforced with an iron hand by Elizabeth (1558-1603), fearing that the wholesale retaining of bravii by her nobles might "sow the seeds of revolution," political maneuvering and incessant grudges kept private action smoldering throughout her reign. Gardner highlights the frame of mind of the drafters of the Board of Association of 1585, and the thousands of Elizabethans that signed it, when she says,

    They pledged themselves `in the presence of the eternal and ever-living God,' whom they knew to have claimed vengeance as his prerogative, that, in the event of an attack on Elizabeth’s person, they would `prosecute to the death' any pretended successor to her throne by whom, or for whom, such an act should be attempted or permitted. They swore `to take the uttermost revenge on them . . . by any possible means . . . for their utter overthrow and extirpation.' (36)
It was made clear that if Elizabeth was assassinated, her cousin Mary Stuart, and son James as a beneficiary to the crime, should be murdered whether or not they were a party to the killing (36). Moral scruples were not considered here, even from law-abiding and God-fearing people; they believed that "the safety of the country and the preservation of the Protestant religion hung on the single life of Elizabeth" (36-37).¹ To ease her insecurity, no doubt, Elizabeth sent courtiers to prison for disobeying her orders against private duels. In spite of her diligence, in the last years of Elizabeth's reign "the rapier supplanted the sturdier sword as the English weapon, honor grew more valuable than life, and the word 'valiant' took on a new meaning. This private duel, though interdicted, became the most honorable and popular Elizabethan method of revenging injuries" (30). But it was with James' rule that blood-revenge flourished again in England. James brought with him Scottish followers with a passion for personal revenge that resulted in an increase of violence among the English. Initially, because of the resentment the English held against the Scottish "invaders," much of the private quarreling was between the Scottish and the English. Although the influence of the Scottish tradition of personal revenge was considerable in its impact on "the attitude of the audience at Elizabethan tragedies, the Englishman was fully conscious of the workings of revenge in his own midst" (20). Revenge once more became so serious a problem that ethical and religious protest again reached a high pitch.
Bowers points out that "long nursing" of revenge, which is "opposed to English sentiment and usage," sent a Lord Sanquire to the gallows in 1607. The case involved the hiring, months later, of two assassins by Sanquire to kill a fencing opponent, Turner, in revenge for Turner taking Sanquire's eye while the two men practiced with the foils. It is probable that Sanquire would have been pardoned "if he had killed Turner himself and without delay" (30). Bowers contends that "Such a murderous, long-continued revenge was evidently considered unusual, for English practice confined itself in general to immediate assault or formal duel . . . " (30).

With the emphasis on court life under James, where bribery, cunning, jealousy, and competition for royal favor were a way of courtier life, personal honor required almost daily vindication, and "the most trivial causes could excite bloodshed" (31). It is in this context, where the code of honor was the rule of the day, that duelling to uphold honor became a serious problem in England. This belief was upheld by popular consent, even among those who agreed with its unlawfulness, likely because of the fear of being labelled cowards. The following is a list of arguments supporting the duel as the means to satisfy the desire for personal blood-revenge:

1. If there were no duels, all persons would draw their swords who have an interest in the injured person's honor [i.e., collective revenge];
2. The fear of damnation keeps men from indulging in unjust quarrels;
3. If an act is lawful for many, it is lawful for one: armies challenge one another and so should individuals;
4. Since laws value private honor no farther than concerns the public safety, the individual must revenge his own dishonor;
5. The laws of knighthood bind all men to revenge an injury;
6. Since no one
shall judge of honor but him who has it, the judges of civil courts (who are base in their origin) are unfitted for the duty; [7] Soldiers are reasonable men, yet we condemn a custom which they have brought in and authorized; [8] Many murders are committed which are undiscovered by law; if private men were allowed to punish these with the sword, murders would decrease. This last shows that the desire for personal blood-revenge was by no means dead in England. (Cotton MS, in Bowers 33).

With a worsening situation progressing to the status of "a serious menace," James finally issued a proclamation against duelling in 1610, followed by his elaborate _Edict_ of 1613. Many subsequent attempts were made to stamp out the duel of revenge, but without success; the practice continued unabated under Cromwell, and Charles II, lasting well into the nineteenth-century.

Eleanor Prosser, in _Hamlet And Revenge_, examines conventional Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge and audience response to revenge in the plays of the period, specifically in respect to Shakespeare's _Hamlet_. She challenges the traditional assumptions that revenge was to be accepted as a "sacred duty" in _Hamlet_, and that "the play's revenge code reflected a theatrical tradition that was frankly opposed to all religious, moral and legal tenets" (xi). She bases these challenges on her Christian interpretation of the play that views an "old barbaric story" in the light of a Christian framework. Prosser attempts to negate the evidence, presented by Bowers and others, of a counter-code challenging the official position against revenge held by the Church and State. Objection is taken, for example, to the frequently cited evidence supporting the code of honor among the nobility, through references to treaties on dueling. "Dueling never became a threat to order," states Prosser,
and "was not recognized as a serious problem in England until after the accession of James I and the influx of the Scots" (14). There is no evidence that the arguments offered by proponents of dueling were even commonly accepted: "But even if dueling were widely accepted as morally justifiable, such evidence would be irrelevant to the immediate problem of the revenge play—the private killing of a defenseless man. Dueling is a highly conventionalized form of open combat between opponents of equal rank and training, equally forewarned and forearmed. No apologist for dueling ever argues that outright revenge murder is justified" (14).

Prosper asks the fundamental question she says any serious investigation of Hamlet must eventually face: "How does Shakespeare intend his audience to regard the ethics of private revenge?" She maintains that this moral issue "underlies the basic dramatic question of the play," that one needs to decide whether the command of the Ghost is "morally binding," and if blood-revenge was an "unquestioned duty" based on the conventional moral ideas of Shakespeare's time (3). Joseph Quincy Adams makes the following assertion concerning the traditional attitude of the Elizabethan audience toward blood-revenge:

The notion that it was morally wrong for a son to avenge his father's murder—especially a murder conceived under such circumstances as represented in the play—was not entertained in Hamlet's time . . . And hence it was held that revenge for a murdered father was solemnly binding on the son—especially an only son. We must be careful not to import into the play modern conceptions of ethical propriety. To the people of his own time, and even to the audience of the Elizabethan age, Hamlet was called upon to perform a "dread" [= sacred] duty. (211)
Although the belief that the law would deny the inheritance to the son who would not avenge the death of his father was a popular idea in England, no such law existed in fact. Because a son's impotence to avenge his father was considered so great a loss of honor in Italy, the code of denial of inheritance was written into their civil law. This same attitude was held in England as evidenced by the writings of Earl of Northampton on dueling: "the ciuile law denies the fathers inheritance to the son which will not reuenge the death of his father" (Cotton MS, in Bowers 38). The Elizabethan audience's belief that the law did exist in England, "combined with the plea of the duelists for the right of blood-revenge, shows a very strong undercurrent favoring private justice for murder in Elizabethan times, a sympathy with (and native knowledge of) blood-revenge, and a persistent tradition by which the son, or heir, must take personal cognizance of the murder of his ancestor" (Bowers 39).

Elizabethan audiences were as influenced by their tradition of blood-revenge as their education in religion and ethics. There was always a tension in the audience between their submission to God's law forbidding revenge and their native tradition favoring revenge under special circumstances, "especially of the heir's legal duty to revenge his father . . ." (40). There would have been few in the Elizabethan audience who would not sympathize with the revenger who had no recourse within the law; "few Elizabethans who would condemn the son's blood-revenge on a treacherous murder whom the law could not apprehend for lack of proper legal evidence" (40). According to Bowers' theory,
the revenger begins with the support of the audience and sustains that sympathy unless the good cause turns to treachery.

The code of personal honor for a gentleman unquestionably outweighed any ethical or religious considerations as it pertained to revenging a personal injury perpetrated against him. The common Englishman did not renounce revenge out of hand on moral grounds either. It became untenable only when entangled in the treacherous and despicable acts that might accompany the revenge. It was "the method and not the act itself" (37) that was at issue in the minds of the Elizabethan audience as they viewed stage-revenge.

A counter theory of audience attitude is presented by Lily B. Campbell. She states "there was a persistent condemnation of revenge in the ethical teaching of Shakespeare's England, a condemnation which was logically posited [on the biblical injunction, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord'] and logically defended" (qtd. in Bowers 35). This second view prevented an ethically and religiously educated audience from condoning the motives of revenge on the stage. This ethical dilemma is taken up by Prosser. She acknowledges traditional assumptions, notably those of Bowers, that although Elizabethan orthodoxy condemned blood-revenge, "most critics still hold that the average Elizabethan believed a son morally bound to revenge his father's death," and that a popular code approving revenge was more influential than that of the established orthodoxy (4). Prosser admits to the persuasiveness of the argument, but goes on to say,
The present investigation suggests, however, that the "popular" attitude toward revenge was far more complex than has been generally assumed. Popular literature and dramatic conventions indicate that the orthodox code did have widespread influence. At the same time, they indicate that the average spectator at a revenge play was probably trapped in an ethical dilemma—a dilemma, to put it most simply, between what he believed and what he felt. (4)

Prosser presents a wealth of evidence to support her contention that Elizabethan moralists "condemned revenge as illegal, blasphemous, immoral, irrational, unnatural, and unhealthy—not to mention unsafe. Moreover, not only did revenge violate religious law, morality, and common sense, it was also thoroughly un-English" (10). She attempts to show that the Elizabethan audience would not condone a son revenging his father's death as an obligation of honor, and that Hamlet's reason for refusing to kill Claudius at prayers could be viewed as a noble act. In short, she challenges the assumption that Hamlet's audience viewed revenge as a moral duty superseding all ethical considerations. Referring to the Ghost, she asks, "Would a spirit of health lay a sacred duty on a beloved son that leads to the destruction of two entire families?" (xii).

Prosser challenges Bowers' assertion that "few Elizabethans . . . would condemn the son's blood-revenge on a treacherous murderer whom the law could not apprehend for lack of proper legal evidence" (qtd. in Prosser 17). Bowers supports his argument with quotations from Gentillet, who argues against Machiavelli's position that a prince can kill a man without fear of revenge as long as he does not confiscate his lands and goods, based on the
supposition that children can accept the death of a father but not the loss of their inheritance. Prosser claims that Gentillet's statement defining a law requiring a son "to pursue by lawful means . . . the unjust death of the slain man" (qtd. in Prosser 17) is erroneously defining "a law requiring legal appeal, not by blood revenge" (Prosser 18). She finds no evidence for the belief among Elizabethans that a son was required to avenge his father's murder, or seek legal punishment, to inherit his estate.

Prosser also maintains that although the famous first line from Bacon's essay "Of Revenge" (1625), mentioned above, would appear to show obvious approval of revenge, "the essay is an unequivocal condemnation of private revenge under any circumstances" (20). In quoting the complete introductory passage, the message seems clear:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over he is superior. . . . This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges are for the most part fortunate . . . But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches; who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate. (qtd. in Prosser 20)

When Bacon says that revenge taken when there is no recourse to law is the most tolerable, "he is merely noting that different types of revenge will arouse different degrees of sympathy" (20). Although Bacon would sympathize with a son taking revenge for the death of his father, he would condemn it on the
same grounds as would the Establishment. "On this issue," Prosser concludes, "Bacon was in complete accord with the best minds of his day. Law, Church, State, and accepted morality were unanimous in their condemnation of private revenge under any circumstances" (21).

English law never granted justification for murder, no matter how extreme the circumstances: not for the most brutal massacre, or for the personal execution of a murderer who found freedom through the efforts of a corrupt magistrate. English law allowed only one exception: instant retaliation for an injury was judged manslaughter, on the grounds that it was unpremeditated, and in the Elizabethan period might be forgiven by royal pardon. To be considered manslaughter, the killing had to be an immediate reaction to immediate injury. Any delay at all indicated premeditation, and Elizabethan law defined murder as unlawful killing by a sane adult with "malice prepense."

Although these moral forces were compelling, Bowers believes that they are too rigid, and do not account for the general views of audiences, or dramatists, on stage-revenges. He asserts that the sympathies of the audience were swayed by several situations involving revenge. He first describes the situation where "retaliation for base injuries" was involved. The Sanquire murder, a revenge for serious injury, would gain more sympathy than murder for jealousy or gain, but would lose any advantage in the hearts of the audience when focus was placed on its cowardice and dishonorable methods. The most justifiable reason for revenge was for murder. It should be remembered that
blood-revenge for murder was still illegal and punishable by law as any other murder. It was also, of course, viewed as an offense against God's will. Bowers says, however, that "there is much evidence of an Elizabethan sympathy for blood-revenge" (37) surviving from England's more tumultuous recent past. Although revenge was officially condemned in every quarter, exception was made for "treacherous" murder. The implication is that personal revenge had been sanctioned when a lack of evidence prevented a conviction of the murderer, or "in cases not covered by law or which could not be proved in the courts" (38).

A further acceptable condition for revenge also applicable to Hamlet is the justifiable use of force. Bowers cites William Perkins, "whose books carried weight with every Elizabethan," to argue that the use of force in self-defense was lawful "when violence is offered, and the Magistrate absent; either for a time, and his stay be dangerous; or altogether, so as no helpe can be had of him, nor any hope of his comming. In this case, God puts the sword into the priuate mans hands" (qtd. in Bowers 36). This is an explicit reference to Hamlet's cause, that is, when justice is unprocurable by law, revenge becomes "allowable" in the minds of the audience. The underlying logic being private-vengeance becomes a means of maintaining law and order, and that "the privilege of blood-revenge would strike more fear into the hearts of murderers than the cumbersome and often faulty process of the law, which could not always discover and punish the slayer" (37). Prosser says that "a faulty
inference" is drawn from the continued use of Perkins' statement, "'God puts the sword into the private mans hands' when the magistrate is absent," to argue that the use of force in self-defense was lawful.¹ What Perkins seems to support is an "instantaneous reaction--the instantaneous repulse of violence in self defense" (20). This is quite different from Bowers' position that there were circumstances when revenge was considered allowable.

Prosser analyzes (to various degrees) twenty-one non-Shakespearean revenge plays presented on the English stage from 1562 to 1607. She concludes that Shakespeare's audience did not view "blood-revenge in the theater as a 'sacred duty'" (70), and Shakespeare's contemporaries did not "automatically assume revenge to be a duty of both piety and honor" (74). Striking evidence is presented for the condemnation of revenge among the revenge tragedies written and performed during this period. She says,

The dominant theatrical tradition seems unmistakable when we consider the witness of six virtuous characters who explicitly reject revenge, five originally virtuous characters who turn villain when they embark on a course of vengeance, seventeen out-and-out villain-revengers, and many others whose threats or advice to pursue revenge are clearly judged as evil. (71)

The issue of revenge, in Prosser's view, was really not an issue to the average playwright or to his audience: "The issue was settled. Revenge was a sin against God, a defiance of the State, a cancer that could destroy mind, body, and soul--and that was that" (72). Although the issue of revenge may have been settled for the "average" playwright, she does say, "It took a profound mind to cut through accepted platitudes and struggle anew with questions that
had long since received official answers . . ." (72). She does not consider any of Shakespeare's contemporaries who had written revenge tragedies to be any more than "practical men of the theater" (72). She goes on to evaluate the revenge motifs found in Shakespeare's plays analogous to the situation faced by Hamlet. Specifically, the revenge motif that runs through the series of plays she discusses is the surrender to revenge "seen as the surrender of reason, the surrender at least to dangerous rashness and at the most to actual madness" (93). Prosser tries not to present Shakespeare as an inflexible moralist sending his revenger to hell with expediency. To the contrary, she says, "At a given moment in a play--the moment when Romeo stabs Tybalt, when Coriolanus defies the screaming mob, when Hotspur vents his rage at personal insult--we often sympathize with the very action that later, when we are released from emotional involvement, we see in perspective" (94). And although Shakespeare shows some compassion for the revenger, his plays bear out the assertion that revenge is God's work: leave him to heaven!

Prosser concludes that Hamlet's revenge had never received Shakespeare moral approval, and that the "instinctive reactions" of Shakespeare's audience was that Hamlet's revenge was not given the same moral approval. Assuming that the literature of the times used the conventional ideas that appealed to their audiences, in Prosser's view there was popular dissemination for the official condemnation of revenge in the Elizabethan period. In contrast, Prosser concedes that in the period "history records that brawling
increased, dueling began to capture interest, lawsuits flooded the courts, and
the revenge tragedy flourished" (23). The obvious question is how accurately
did these Establishment pieties reflect the popular attitude, and the attitude of
Shakespeare's audience? Prosser acknowledges both the contradictions of the
twentieth-century--"ravaged by war and prejudice," while preaching "peace and
equality," and the sixteenth-century--"torn by religious and political dissension,"
while moralizing endlessly "its belief in natural order and harmony" (24). These
are suitable examples of ages in rebellion against their own morality and ethical
standards. Prosser goes on to say that although Shakespeare's audience may
have sympathized with the rebel, "we must not make the error of equating
sympathy with moral approval" (33). She outlines the arguments for man's
instinctive drive for revenge for an understanding of the revenge tragedy:

Few audiences in any age would be unsympathetic to a basically
good man who hazards his life in a defiant battle against evil. Few
would fail to understand an attractive young hero who feels he
must assert his manhood when he is taunted with cowardice. Few
would fail to respond to the rebel who, immobilized by the "No's"
of civil and divine law, rejects passive endurance as the highest
goal to which man can aspire. (33)

She goes on to say that although the typical Elizabethan may have strongly
sympathized with a revenger, he did not disregard the ethical and religious
precepts in which he was grounded. Prosser asks, "Is it not at least possible
that the Elizabethan audience could instinctively identify with the revenger and
yet-- either at the same time or later, when released from emotional
involvement-- that it could judge him too?" (34).
When presented with so much contrary and conflicting evidence concerning personal revenge, one is hard pressed to understand the attitude Shakespeare's audience would bring to it. We may expect that with a society in transition and where ideas were evolving, no clear position had yet emerged concerning the place personal revenge occupied in the culture. What is clear, however, is that the legal system forbade taking the law into one's own hands, and there were abundant moral and religious objections to blood-revenge. The question remains, did the society at large generally hold these official views against revenge, or did they, in spite of these official prohibitions, condone revenge under certain circumstances? Did Shakespeare's audience, then, agree with the official position against personal revenge, or did they hold that honor was more important than conscience? The answers, of course, are clouded with rhetoric from both sides.

Prosser makes an interesting point when she characterizes the sixteenth-century as an age in rebellion against itself in terms of its moral and ethical standards. In new historicist terms, culture is portrayed as a self-generating phenomenon which is continuously inventing itself. As stated previously, there can be no "single political vision" attributable to a culture, and when applied to Renaissance society, no single position on personal revenge would have been held by the entire population. There was likely a dominant view encompassing the "sacredness," or "sacilege," of taking personal revenge, but there seems no sure way to know what that view was, or if Shakespeare even went along with
it. What we do know is that Hamlet's delay is a reflection of, or at least an
element in, that debate: there is ample textual evidence for Hamlet weighing
both sides of the question of revenge in his soliloquies and speeches. It is the
feeling of this writer that because of the unstable and changing climate of those
times, the religious and moral prohibitions against revenge, touching upon
matters of conscience and honor, were being debated by Shakespeare's
audience as well.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, could have created in its audience what D.G.
James calls "the new doubt" (qtd. in Hibbard 2), which was characteristic of the
Renaissance erosion of medieval values, where "old certainties and long
established ways of thinking began to collide with new doubts and revolutionary
modes of thinking" (Hibbard 5). The play, centering on the transformation of its
main character, may have been written to produce such a collision.

**Revenge Tragedy: The Dramatic Form and *Hamlet***

What is the dramatic form of the Elizabethan blood-revenge tragedy and
how does Shakespeare's *Hamlet* fit into this genre? Revenge was seen as an
irresistible passion imposed by destiny on individuals who had no part in the
original murder. It became "an agonizing but inescapable burden," and the
revenge play was the first to show how a "great character could be overcome
by evil tides of feeling in the act of opposing them and be driven to breakdown
or madness" (Maregson, qtd. in Hallet and Hallet 4). The revenge tragedy
exploited the atmosphere of melodramatic uncertainty and suspense. "The principal interest in the revenge hero" says Roland Frye, in *The Renaissance Hamlet*, "concerned the fascinating horrors he would devise in return for the horrors which had been inflicted on him, and also the Machiavellian intrigues and counter-intrigues employed along the way" (168). Shakespeare gave his audiences full measure of suspense in the theatrical tradition he inherited. If he had given no more, Shakespeare's Hamlet would be as memorable as the other "fascinating horrors" of the genre; but, of course, we are given a great deal more:

Shakespeare has given us suspense of three kinds: the suspense inherent in the tradition of the revenge play itself plus the suspense of variations upon that form so that the audience was often kept wondering whether the Prince ever would achieve revenge at all, and (of far more lasting interest) the suspense of probing the ultimate mysteries of human nature and destiny. All of this done with a poetic power and philosophical depth which goes beyond merely topical and time-bound concerns. (168)

The suspense manifests itself as Hamlet's deliberations on these mysteries of life in the context of the moral, religious, and political concerns of his time. Lee Thorn characterizes the theme Shakespeare adopted for Hamlet's progression through the mysteries of life as a "rite of passage," and holds that the "dramatic concern (as opposed to its religious, moral, and philosophical implications)" of *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example, "is whether and how the obstacles of circumstances can be overcome" (127). He goes on to say, "Hamlet's dramatic concern is whether and how the obstacles of character can be overcome" (127).
What was the frame of reference the typical Elizabethan brought to the play concerning Hamlet's delay in revenging his father's death? The Ghost's command to Hamlet to take revenge was "considerably more ambiguous in 1600 than some literary historians and critics have recognized" (Frye 11). Frye believes the complexities inherent in Hamlet's problem of revenge, either challenging the religious and moral laws of the period, or risking condemnation from the same Elizabethan audience for ignoring the supernatural command of revenge, have not been fully appreciated by modern scholarship. Even when Hamlet learns that the Ghost's report was proven true, an Elizabethan audience would still not agree on a course of action for the unfortunate Prince:

Hamlet surely has an obligation, but an obligation which would have been subject to diametrically opposite interpretations. Some Elizabethans would have held that he is morally bound to accept Claudius as de facto king, despite the fact that he is an evil and tyrannous ruler, whereas others would have seen it as his duty to purge the realm of a tyrannous usurper and establish himself as rightful king in succession to his father. (Frye 11-12)

The audience to which Shakespeare wished to appeal would not have brought to the theater a uniform sensitivity and moral code that would elicit "the proper response" to the problems Hamlet faces. Prosser, on the other hand, does not suggest that a rejection of revenge on moral grounds would automatically call forth an emotional rejection by the average theater-goer. She admits that the theme of revenge was an enormously appealing one to the Elizabethan living in an age of such uncertainty, fraught with violence, and shackled with a code that required him to do nothing. She says the revenger was an "ideal" character to
identify with,
a man like himself, surrounded by evil and bound by the laws of
God and man that said 'Thou shalt not' at every turn; but he also
saw an exceptional man who, unlike himself, somehow asserted a
hidden potential in his willful rebellion against established order, in
his defiant refusal to let corruption go unpunished. (72)

Prosser holds that it was probable that Elizabethan audiences, caught-up in the
immediate excitement of the play, would later condemn those very actions they
showed strong sympathy toward. According to Frye, it is through Hamlet's
soliloquies that Shakespeare virtually analyzes, scrutinizes, and synthesizes all
alternatives, and their possible consequences, which may have occurred to the
thoughtful Elizabethan attending the play. And by play's end, "Hamlet would
have earned the dramatic admiration of most members of an Elizabethan
audience, whether or not they agreed with his particular views and his course of
action" (14). It is by way of this perspective of examining Elizabethan
uncertainties and ambiguities, and through the "flawed" mirror of the historical
period, that we must approach the problem of Hamlet's delay.

On the assumption that the play can be best understood through the
filter of an Elizabethan lens, the issue of how that lens is to be focused still
needs to be addressed. Should it be turned in the direction of seeing how the
Elizabethan audience viewed Hamlet's situation, considering their attitudes and
expectations toward blood-revenge, or in a direction that Shakespeare urged
them if different from popular belief? Although riddled with disagreement among
the critics, the more practical course is the former; the latter is pure speculation.
Shakespeare's "Revenge Tragedy"

Joseph Brodsky, in an essay for *The New Yorker*, evaluated Robert Frost as the quintessential American poet of American Letters. Brodsky recounts that at a banquet given in New York on the occasion of the poet's eighty-fifth birthday, in a thoughtful and memorable toast, Lionel Trilling, who Brodsky labeled the most prominent literary critic of the period, declared Frost "a terrifying poet." Brodsky then made a clear distinction between terrifying and tragic. "Tragedy," Brodsky noted, "is always a fait accompli, whereas terror always has to do with a ticipatio, with man's recognition of his own negative potential—with his sense of what he is capable of" (70).

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be a revenge tragedy, but Shakespeare shows himself to be "a terrifying poet" as well. Hamlet is terrified that he may discover the potential evil in his own heart.

There is considerably less distinction between good and evil for Shakespeare's tragic hero as there is for the heroes of the traditional revenge tragedy. Hamlet is made to face moral judgments about issues that were far from agreed upon in Renaissance England. As Frye assures us, "The Prince was involved in what would in 1600 have seemed an extraordinarily and fascinating case of conscience" (171). This was not true for contemporary revengers, whether from the pens of Marston, Kyd, Tourneur, or other playwrights of the genre. The mentality of the traditional revenge hero was confined to savage vengeance. A great deal of contemplation was hardly necessary for the accomplishment of his task. In contrast, Shakespeare viewed
"men's acts not as exertions made upon external objects but as results of internal struggles" (Lewis 81). To more finely tune the distinction, Laertes, the conventional villian-revenger in Shakespeare's play, is "prompted to his actions by nothing more than his own cravings. As a symbol, he represents that aspect of revenge which originates in the psyche of the individual" (Hallet and Hallet 6). Hamlet is the conventional hero-revenger who is placed on the path of revenge by forces outside himself, and is ambivalent about the efficacy of the role he is cast in. As a matter of course, little is ever "conventional" in Shakespeare's hands, and Laertes is not simply a villian-revenger, and Hamlet the conventional hero-revenger. Laertes is "a very noble youth" (5.1.214) who craves revenge from deep in his psyche; Hamlet, although extremely ambivalent, exhibits the same psychic urge to revenge as does Laertes, a point more fully developed later in the study. The theatrical form of Shakespeare's revenge tragedy thus beguiled the audience, along with Hamlet, to deliberate over what should be done about the Ghost's story and how the revenge should be accomplished.

It is accepted that Shakespeare, as did his fellow playwrights, "borrowed" ready-made plots making only slight variations in the story lines. "The making of plot-material was not his business. What he did feel to be his business was the realization of character" (Lewis 77). Shakespeare's revenge tragedy had borrowed generously from Belleforest's historical account\(^2\) of a Norse legend. It draws also from the \textit{Ur-Hamlet} that introduced a ghost commanding Hamlet to
take revenge on the King. Although the Ur-Hamlet was viewed as quite "ridiculous," "one aspect of Shakespeare's genius was his ability to take an old-fashioned drama and utterly transform it" (Hibbard 13). The Hamlet of the earlier revenge tragedy, sometimes attributed to Thomas Kyd, was, according to Lewis,

an ideal romantic hero, master of himself and intent upon his purpose. He may have reproached himself for the delay, . . . but, if so, it must have been very clear (as in The Spanish Tragedy) that his apparent self-reproach was only the effect of his impatient despair at the restraint from without. There was nothing for which he could blame himself, and, above all, Kyd did not intend that he should be blamed by anybody else. (75)

In this, as in Belleforest's version, Hamlet was prevented from killing the King, while Shakespeare looked to Hamlet's interior motives to decide whether he would kill him. The Ur-Hamlet presented a conventional study in passionate revenge. What, then, could have interested Shakespeare in this presentation? Lewis tells us that Shakespeare "found there a noble, capable, and strong man, in every way admirable, suddenly called upon to dedicate himself to a savage passion" (89). He is called upon to perform a most sacred duty, a command from his father's spirit, and he gives his life in the pursuit of his revenge. How was Shakespeare to tell this story? How are we to understand it? How are we to understand Hamlet's delay?

**A Timetable for Delay**

It may be helpful to reconstruct a framework to encompass the passage
of time throughout the play. We can assume that Hamlet had been at school in
Wittenberg at the time of his father's death and rushed home for the funeral. We can expect that the family therefore waited several weeks to bury the King. Hamlet speaks of his father being "But two months dead- nay not so much, not two-" (1.2.138) during his first soliloquy. This occasioned the first public appearance of the royal family since the death. We can also infer from this speech that the marriage (and coronation) took place about a month after the death, but, "follow[ing] hard upon" (1.2.179), perhaps no more than a week after the funeral. It would appear that the memory of the incestuous marriage is as "green" as that of "Hamlet our dear brother's death" (1.2.1-2).

The next mention of time passing is in Act II when Hamlet asks the Players to enact *The Murder of Gonzago* and arranges for the play to be performed the next night: "We'll ha't tomorrow night" (2.2.528). This allows us to see that the events of the third act follow by one day. In Act III Ophelia informs us that "tis twice two months" (3.2.119) since Hamlet's father died. We would need too conclude that two additional months have passed when we hear of Ophelia's frightening encounter with Hamlet near the start of Act II. Hamlet kills Polonius the evening of the performance of the "Mousetrap" and is shipped off to England the next morning. His last mention of delay is contained in his "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy (3.8.32-66) just before departing for England. Hamlet gives up his *pursuit* of personal vengeance while on board the pirate ship by placing his faith in God's providence to accomplish
his ends. It would appear that after this juncture in the play, Hamlet is no longer bothered by delay pricking his conscience, but this does not change the fact that his father is still unavenged. Bradley tells us that between Hamlet's embarking on his voyage and "the remainder of the play we must again suppose an interval, though not a very long one" (113). The events that bring on the multiple deaths have already been put into motion by Hamlet's decision not to kill the King at prayers. Hamlet kills Claudius in the duelling scene within three months of the time he is commanded to do so by the Ghost. Although this time interval is unacceptably long for those who hold that Hamlet was obligated to do the task "immediately" upon accepting the command of the Ghost to kill the King, it would not be an inappropriate delay for those who view it as the task of a Renaissance Prince in Hamlet's situation.6

The Enormity of the Task

To understand why Hamlet delays the immediate killing of his uncle, it is important to understand the full scope of the task that the Ghost requires of Hamlet. What are the circumstances that Hamlet finds so difficult and that take on such tragic consequences? Wilson asks, "Is not the cross intolerable? Would it not crush us to death?" (44). After being literally brought to his knees by the grief thrust upon him by the Ghost's graphic description of his wretched situation, Hamlet staggers under an even greater load--the task that he is called upon to perform. Wilson makes the point that the Ghost, although demanding revenge, does not specify "how."7 He simply commands,
If thou didst ever thy dear father love---
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. (1.5.22 & 24)

Wilson continues, "that is the gist of it. Revenge, but how" (45). It appears that the Ghost's "But howsoever thou pursuest this act" (1.5.83), amounts to his full instructions to Hamlet to carry out his revenge. What the Ghost does prescribe as parameters for revenge are, first, that there be an end to the royal bed of Denmark being "a couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.82). The second command is also clear:

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught--leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. (1.5.84-87)

The Ghost seems to be as concerned with ridding the State of its pollution in away that would spare Gertrude from scandal and rescue the family name as with killing Claudius. Wilson states it succinctly: "The salvation of the Queen by the rescuing of her from the seductions of her paramour is as strong a motive with the Ghost as the vengeance itself, which is after all the only means of rehabilitating the family honour" (46). Wilson further contends that it would be impossible to bring Claudius to public justice without implicating Gertrude and exposing her to "exactly the situation which the Ghost had commanded Hamlet to avoid. Life would have been impossible for Gertrude under such circumstances... The awful secret was a family affair, in which the whole honour of the House of Hamlet was involved" (47 & 48). It was difficult enough for Gertrude to hastily enter into an incestuous marriage, which was public
knowledge; it would have been impossible for her to bear the public scorn of being regarded an accomplice if it were known that Claudius killed her husband. As Wilson relates, "The facts were, indeed, so black against her, that Hamlet himself suspects her complicity, and his suspicions even lead him to entertain thoughts of exacting vengeance upon her as well as her consort" (47). Hamlet, it should be remembered, does not intend the killing of the ruling sovereign to be also an act of self-annihilation. He seeks to find a way to accomplish his revenge without further soiling his family's honor, and like Laertes, to keep his "fair name ungorged" (5.2.196). Adams concurs that "The killing of his uncle, therefore, must first be carried out with safety to himself, and then at once justified to a partisan Court and to the whole people of Denmark" (226). The difficulty of this task is greatly increased by Hamlet's "obligation to keep his mother from being implicated in the exposures that necessarily would follow" (226). And "[t]o all the other burdens which fate had piled upon the hero a last and crowning one was added, the burden of doubt" (Wilson 49).

Hamlet's Burden of Doubt

What can be occupying Hamlet's mind after he has recovered from the trauma of confronting his father's spirit? Hamlet could conceivably have killed Claudius the night of his encounter with the Ghost. He puts off immediate revenge and bides his time because he is not convinced that the Ghost is telling the truth. Taken by surprise by the appearance of the Ghost, Hamlet's
immediate reaction is fear: "Angels and Ministers of grace defend us!" (1.4.18), in contrast to Horatio's, "Look, my lord, it comes" (17). Shakespeare gives us Hamlet's first indication of his impending delay that will torment the character until his arrival back from his sailing adventure. We hear Hamlet's fearful cries as the Ghost enters:

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 com'st in such a questionable shape  
That I will speak to thee. (1.4.19-23)

Hamlet then displays a posture that denies the portended danger of a spirit that could have been sent by the devil. Horatio and Marcellus plead with him not to follow it, but overcome by his melancholy, and engulfed in the passion of the moment, Hamlet rationalizes why he does not hesitate to follow the Ghost:

Why, what should be the fear?  
I do not set my life at a pin's fee,  
And for my soul, what can it do that,  
Being a thing immortal as itself? (1.4.45-48)

Hibbard tells us that Horatio, in his "What if" speech that immediately follows, describes Elizabethan popular belief "that the devil sought to win souls for hell by tempting men into taking their own lives and by providing them the opportunity for doing so" (n. 183). Hamlet's denial of his fear is brought on by the understandable tumult and fervor accompanying the appearance of his father's spirit. As a result, his judgment "wax[ing] desperate with imagination" (1.4.62) becomes impaired. The Elizabethan Hamlet, like Horatio and Marcellus, would be acutely aware of the danger not only to his physical being, but also to his soul.
Hamlet's actions are motivated by resignation, and by a lack of regard for his own life. Horatio's and Marcellus' attempts to prevent Hamlet from following the Ghost are greeted by Hamlet with a kind of hysteria that belies the danger. Here, some say, we are witnessing the acts of a fearless man who breaks free of his captors, threatening, "By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me" (1.4.60) Is it an act of bravery, a rational and resolute act of a man whose "fate cries out" to him, or are we seeing a desperate man who has given up on life and feels he has nothing more to lose, because he has already lost everything of value? Although this may not be an act of bravery that identifies the spontaneous reaction of a tragic hero, it does foreshadow the heroic aspect of Hamlet's character he displays later in the play.

The Ghost commands Hamlet to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.4.24). Hamlet first appeals to heaven for assurance, and acknowledges "the possibility of the Ghost's infernal origin" (Hibbard n. 190):

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? And shall I couple hell? O fie! (1.4.91-92)

Hamlet dismisses his spontaneous castigation of the Ghost's questionable command, his hellish thoughts, with "O fie!" and swears to remember the "poor ghost." Here are the seeds of doubt that are sown to germinate the long debate in Hamlet's mind on whether the Ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damned." The fear of killing an innocent man on the word of a spirit, whose counsel has not been proven for good or ill, is part of the enigmatic burden that keeps Hamlet from acting to kill the King.
Although Hamlet had greeted the possibility of speaking to the Ghost "though hell itself should gape / And bid hold my peace" (1.2.248) with enthusiasm and energy, he is also aware that he is putting his soul in danger. He cannot be sure if the Ghost is good or evil, and must wait for confirmation of Claudius' guilt through his own admission. Caught up in the emotions of the moment where all doubts are swept aside by his love for his father and his horror and pity for his father's spirit, Hamlet makes his promise of revenge to the Ghost.

When his momentary passion subsides and "as the interview recedes, its effect weakens, the certainty grows dimmer, more weight is given to the possibility that the spirit may have assumed the pleasing shape of the dead king to damn his son. And the longer Hamlet waits, the greater grow both his doubts and his scorn of himself for not acting" (Joseph 106).

As stated previously, the Ghost's commands to Hamlet to take revenge would have evoked differing interpretations in Renaissance England. According to scholars, the religious and civil codes against personal revenge versus the risk of condemnation from the same moral complexities for ignoring the supernatural command of revenge would be a source of great anxiety for those unfortunate enough to be faced with such a dilemma. And even when Hamlet satisfies himself that the Ghost's report was proven true, he still would not be convinced of a decisive course of action. Was he morally bound to accept an evil and tyrannous ruler, or in "perfect conscience / [to] quit him with this arm" (5.2.68-69) to stop the spread of further evil? Hamlet's "uncertainty of position, especially when joined with the questionable nature and purpose of the Ghost,
makes Hamlet's problem intensely challenging, and perhaps even insoluble" (Frye 12).

Hamlet's remorse is first openly expressed in his third soliloquy after he leaves the players. It is the first time he verbally acknowledges that the spirit might be Satan. In the first half of the soliloquy he berates himself unmercifully for not only putting off the revenge, "but [for] his ignoble conduct in feigning madness\(^{25}\) so that he becomes an object of pity, and derision . . ." (106-7). As a possible consequence of his melancholy, Hamlet believes that the Devil, who "is very potest with such spirits / A uses him to dam him" (2.2.597-99). It is clear that the Prince must have "grounds / More relative than this" (599-600) to act on his promise to revenge his father's death. Joseph tells us that Hamlet's delay to this point is the action of

any sensible man who holds the doctrine preached by renaissance churches; he is terrified of hell. No one can blame him logically for hesitating to imperil his immortal soul, yet his own sense of honour makes him ashamed: he hates his inactivity, squirms and rages at his ignobility, and all the more intensely because no matter how hard honour may pull in one direction, he cannot move while the fear of damnation is held before him by his conscience. (108)

Motivated more by his conscience and religious convictions than by the social and legal codes of the period prohibiting revenge, "he is terrified by his conscience into waiting until the Ghost's claims and assertions have been proved true" (108).
Conscience Versus Honor

It is Hamlet's conscience, then, pitted against his honor, which fuels his delays of revenge. William Empson tells us that "the basic assumption of the Revenge Play is that Honour has duties Christianity refuses to recognize" (121). The term "conscience" in the Renaissance period was believed to be the faculty of one that recognized and warned against committing sin (Joseph 109). It is Hamlet's conscience that makes him "fear to offend," and the uneasy conscience is so potent because it not only "insists on recognizing sin and warning of the consequences, but because the wrongdoer knows that this very faculty of his which is worrying him, will when the time comes stand witness for or against him in accordance with his action" (110). At the same time, Hamlet displays a "longing for action which makes caution feel contemptible, but which nevertheless emphasizes his dilemma quite clearly" (111).

Lily Campbell places Hamlet in the Renaissance context of a study in grief leading to overriding passion. She expresses Hamlet's fatal flaw as an inability to cope with his overwhelming grief that produces an acting out of uncontrollable passion. Talking about the two opposing forces in Hamlet's character, the man who feels compelled to hold back, and the man who cannot hold it in any longer, she describes his emotions as erupting in an explosion of misguided words and actions. Referring to the Player King's speech,

What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy, (3.2.182-85)
Campbell points out that purpose born out of "violent" passion does not last. Resolve is worn away when the passion of the moment subsides. A clear example is when Hamlet is reminded by the Ghost, "to whet [his] almost blunted purpose." Hamlet asks the Ghost if his visitation is to chide his tardy son,

That, lapsed in time and passion, let go by
Th'important acting of your dread command? (3.4.100-103)

Hamlet experiences what is for him grief so afflicting that he considers ending his life to ease his pain. Once rejecting suicide, Hamlet can purge himself of its disabling effects only by abandoning himself to his passions. He can only act instinctively when his reason is overtaken by his passion. He cannot sustain a pledge to revenge that was begotten out of impulsiveness and disorder. Although his noble nature views revenge as his moral obligation, his actions are tempered by Renaissance conscience. Hibbard contends that "the quality of Hamlet's mind that is insisted on throughout the play is its nobility . . . [Shakespeare] thus presents the hero with the dilemma that is at the heart of revenge tragedy: how is the nobility of the successful avenger to be preserved?" (n. 190). Hamlet's self-preservation amounts to momentary lurches into "enterprises of great pith and moment" (3.1.87) bordering on madness (a temporary insanity to be sure), which acts as a cathartic release of tension and anxiety.

A clear contrast can be made to Laertes who assumes the role of avenger with relative ease. As a foil to the play's hero, with passionate
commitment and fiery determination, Laertes represents the young aristocratic nobleman who treasures honor--honoring his good name above reason. And once his honor is soiled, his unbridled passion will stop at nothing to exact revenge. If Hamlet were Laertes, Claudius would be dead in the time it took to run from the battlements to the throne-room. But unlike Laertes, who is able to overcome conscience and give full regard to honor, Hamlet is preoccupied with both; he cannot pursue one without being plagued by the other: "Honour demands vengeance, conscience terrifies him into waiting" (Joseph 116).

Waiting brings only contempt; there is no honor in suffering silently, and yet, Hamlet cannot act until he has satisfied his conscience, his inner voice of moral judgment. If fearing eternal damnation for committing the sin of murder on a spirit's untested word is an act of conscience, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (3.1.84).

Hamlet's Intellectual and Sensitive Nature

Hamlet perceives the Ghost's charges against Claudius on two levels. He becomes personally responsible to revenge his father's murder, and he also must correct the historical wrong of willful regicide. Hamlet must take on both personal and political responsibility that seems an overwhelming task. He laments, "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, \\ That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.196-97). As a Renaissance scholar, Hamlet is led to self-examination to discover if he is able to perform premeditated murder, a violence that is
against his nature. He is caught between the bounds of an assigned imperative to restore honor to the tarnished throne of Denmark and his contemplative and philosophical nature; it is a bleak struggle between action and intellect. It would follow that a man educated as a liberal humanist would attempt to approach his plight through reason rather than emotion. Hamlet's appeal to reason to bring balance to the bestial in man's nature is exemplified in his "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason . . ." speech (2.2.300-04). Hamlet's high regard for reason "was in keeping with the Christian epistemology of the sixteenth-century as it helped to form the English Renaissance and Reformation" (Frye n. 340). Being a Renaissance prince, he would seek to combine both action and thoughtfulness, as Ophelia recalls the noble Prince:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;  
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, . . . . (3.1.152-53)

Hamlet is aware of the Renaissance ideal of combining the warlike quality of Mars and the reason and understanding of Mercury that he had seen in his dead father:

An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,  
A station like the herald Mercury  
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill--  
A combination and a form indeed  
Where every god did seem to set his seal  
To give the world assurance of a man. (3.4.58-63)

Frye maintains that, "both implicitly and explicitly, Hamlet's soliloquies record his efforts to achieve a similar resolution" (175). And in his attempt to combine the attributes of both Mars and Mercury, Hamlet must look to both Horatio and
Fortinbras as foils to "achieve thought without cowardice, and decisiveness without recklessness" (175). Although his struggle against his rashness, his killing the wrong man in his mother's bed-chamber, begins a train of events that ultimately ends in his own destruction, his struggle against his perceived cowardice occupies a good deal of his thoughts. This preoccupation with being overtaken by fear, thus paralyzing his will to act, first appears at the conclusion of Act Two when he cries out, "Am I a coward?" (2.2.559). Hamlet also talks about his cowardice in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy, and his last soliloquy in Act IV when he reflects on Fortinbras' warring:

Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event--
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward . . . (4.4. 31-35)

Hamlet's thoughts about cowardice appear to be a manifestation of his inability to understand why he does not act:

. . . I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't. (4.4.35-39)

He brings up the subject of his "cowardice" as a possible answer to his delay solely to reject it. He knows he is not a coward, and the reinforcement of this idea is important to his wounded ego. Here we can especially appreciate Hamlet's difficult task of uniting the scholar, a Mercuric man, "noble in reason," with the rashness of the soldier, with "an eye like Mars," into honorable action, taken together as one primary cause for delaying revenge.
A Prince's Dilemma

Frye gives a brief summary of the historical conditions and pressures a sixteenth-century prince of Hamlet's position would have been faced with: [1] Under early Tudor doctrine all resistance to established authority in England, "even if tyrannical and abusive," was forbidden. A passive acceptance of the inherited status quo was enforced. In addition, Elizabethan doctrine publicly recognized a quite different standard for foreign princes from those approved in Anglican England. [2] At the other extreme, Scottish Calvinism advocated "all-out opposition to a tyrant, urging all of society to take up arms and use whatever force necessary to defeat and overthrow the unjust authority." [3] A third position was fostered by the Huguenot magnates. Simply stated, it was the sole obligation of a prince of the blood, and "only when certain of his ground and of his conscience," to initiate action against a tyrant (168).17 It is within this context that Shakespeare's audience would have judged Hamlet's confronting his difficult, confusing, and contradictory alternatives. The taking of another's life in premeditated murder, and especially the life of a king, is understandably agonizing. For Hamlet, who is a Renaissance prince, the most natural reaction would be to hesitate, to come to terms with his emotions and think about the problem as rationally as possible before taking any action. This is what he does. He delays any rash attempt to strike out at his uncle and devises a plan to verify that his uncle is guilty of regicide. Hamlet first conceals the Ghost's charges from Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus, and swears them to secrecy.
about seeing the Ghost. He also plans to put on an "antic disposition" to try to
disguise his intentions to discover if the Ghost is telling the truth. It is clear
that after Hamlet's emotions subside, he is not sure that what he witnessed was
of heaven or the work of the devil. From the very beginning of the play Hamlet
tries to restrain his compunction, the anxiety arising from his guilt, to take
immediate action as might be expected of a son when he discovers that his
father has been murdered.

The Ghost haunts Hamlet's reveries and penetrates his deepest thoughts
to goad him into action. These moments of meditation and contemplation
become filled with self-recriminations and flagellation. He forces himself to
confront the division in his nature that is causing his turmoil. Hamlet's
soliloquies become both exercises in reason to decide upon a course of action
and confessionals to purge his extreme feelings of guilt. He fills his life with
words because he can not bring himself to act, while directing his built-up anger
and tensions toward others. Hamlet, believing Ophelia has betrayed him,
displaces his repressed feelings of hostility onto her in an outpouring of abuse.
His interchange with his mother when he asserts his need to be cruel "only to
be kind" (3.4.167), appears to have little kindness in it. His soliloquies may be
seen as overly reflective at moments when circumstances appear to call for
more decisive action, but they also serve to excite Hamlet into renewed
commitment, at least momentarily. Frye contends, "Hamlet's response is to
deliberate, in the full sense of weighing and evaluating the alternatives before
him, and about that he repeatedly expresses guilt feelings which cannot be
ignored" (171). Although he points out the function of delay and the guilt it
engenders in Hamlet's characterization, Frye warns not to exaggerate its overall
importance: "Hamlet's inaction irritates him and may derivatively irritate us, but
delay in a prince is not necessarily a bad thing" (171). Frye cites Giovanni
Botero, an authority on sixteenth-century statesmanship, who advises, ". . . a
ruler should avoid extremes but should be `deliberate and judicious, inclining
rather to slowness than to haste because slowness has some affinity with
prudence and haste with rashness'" (qtd. in Frye 171).

The Irony of Action

Hamlet's next delay comes with the appearance of the players. He
devises a scheme to provoke Claudius to expose his guilt as he watches a play
Hamlet entitles "The Mousetrap." Elated with the results, Hamlet, then on his
way to his mother's chambers, comes across Claudius praying. Erlich, arguing
that Hamlet's dilemma derives from the lack of a strong father in his life, helps
to illustrate his thesis through an analysis of the prayer scene. He tells us that
Hamlet "wishes his father strong enough to punish Claudius" in a speech that
"dredges up" to consciousness the repressed material from his "secret self"
(28). The father Erlich refers to is not King Hamlet or even his suffering spirit,
but "God, the universal father figure" (29). By substituting God for King Hamlet,
Erlich maintains that "we hear Hamlet unconsciously wishing that his father
were able to do his own revenging" (29). The phrase "hire and salary" is the
lynch-pin on which his reading of Hamlet's thoughts rests. Erlich says Hamlet
believes that by killing Claudius himself, he would be no better than a hired
mercenary whose only concern is to get the job done. This would require that
King Hamlet, too weak to do the deed himself, must hire an assassin. In
Hamlet's mind, "Just as Hamlet wants to see God the father as the crucial
punisher, he also would like his own father to be able to punish, and he implies
that his father has abdicated the responsibility by hiring and salarying his son"
(30). Erlich points out that most literary and psychoanalytic critics see Hamlet's
delay in killing Claudius in the prayer scene as simply another convenient
rationalization. He counters this argument by asserting that by Hamlet's
delaying Claudius's death, he can "fantasize" a situation by which he could trust
God to do His work:

Now is not a good time because God would be handcuffed
by His own rules and, according to Hamlet's tortured theology, He
would have to pardon Claudius. Hamlet needs a God and a father
who is not so tolerant of "incestuous" criminals . . . Hamlet does
not act in the prayer scene, I think, because he unconsciously
wants his father to act. He desperately needs a strong father who,
like his punitive God, will damn Claudius to hell. (30, 31).

Erlich maintains that this is borne out at the end of the play when Hamlet
returns to Denmark with a belief in God's "special providence" to aid him in his
revenge.

Erlich looks to Otto Rank for the interesting argument that Hamlet, wanting
to catch his uncle in the same sinful state King Hamlet was caught in when
killed to "duplicate" his father's death, "is expressing a patricidal wish" (32). Hamlet wishing his father strong to kill the patricidal Claudius, "is precisely to guard against his own patricidal tendencies" (32). To kill Claudius himself, would be admitting that God, the father, and his own father, are incapable of punishing; "hence he delays, waiting for a father who will be strong in the end, even if the end is not until the day of judgement" (32).

There is little preparation for Hamlet's astonishing behavior sheathing his sword and again delaying his revenge. Yet, Hamlet may be harboring reservations from the beginning when he announces, "Now might (italics mine) I do it pat, now he is praying" (3.3.73). Gardner, referring to Hamlet stabbing a kneeling, defenseless man, makes the interesting comment that "this opportunity is no opportunity at all; the enemy is within touching distance, but out of reach" (46). Killing Claudius under these circumstances may not fulfill the requirement for Hamlet's revenge. The revenger needs to exact at least equal hurt for the crime that was perpetrated against him. In his drive for revenge, Macduff is upset that Macbeth does not have children because his own children were slain: Macduff refers to his "wife and children's ghosts haunt[ing] me still" (Macbeth 5.7.16). Delaying revenge to wait for just the right circumstances to strike was not uncommon in Renaissance England. Hamlet postponing vengeance also works as a theatrical device, "[i]for--theatrically speaking--Hamlet's failure to act is not a failure at all. We do not wish him to kill the king
at this moment: we want him to wait" (Andrews 85). The waiting is not for moral or religious forbearance; the King "must live now so he may die better--that is, more dramatically--later" (85). Hamlet kills Claudius in the duelling scene, a sequence ironically arranged by Claudius to kill Hamlet. Unlike Laertes, who confesses his part in the treachery and acknowledges the justice of his situation, Claudius makes no acknowledgement of his crimes and dies impenitent. Hamlet seeing there is "no relish of salvation" in Claudius' death, feels confident he has exacted a just revenge.

Hamlet takes his first physical action to revenge, thinking it is Claudius hidden behind the arras, by mistakenly killing Polonius in a fit of passion.21 Ironically, it is Hamlet's very attempt to strike out against Claudius and achieve his goal of vengeance that brings on his own destruction. On the Elizabethan stage, "blood demanded blood;" and his hands stained with innocent blood, Hamlet was "thereafter a doomed man" (Bowers, "Minister And Scourge" 741). Hamlet is detained and then sent to England. It is on this mystical voyage, a voyage of discovery and transformation, that Hamlet comes to terms with his problem of revenge. Still uncertain and filled with indecision, it is not until Hamlet returns to Denmark in Act V "that his uncertainties have been resolved, and the conscience he has so painfully consulted is now fully committed to a single just and decisive action" (Frye 176). He comes to terms with death in the graveyard scene realizing that all things must die and that Claudius will also meet his fate.22 It is here in the graveyard that Hamlet accepts the condition of
being human. He not only accepts death, but he accepts life as well, naked, and free of his self-absorption and wild imaginings. Along with the mysteries of life with which Hamlet has so long struggled,

[The mystery of evil is presented here—for this is after all the universal graveyard, where, as the clown says humorously, he holds up Adam's profession; where the scheming politician, the hollow courtier, the tricky lawyer, the emperor and the clown and the beautiful young maiden, all come together in an emblem of the world; where even, Hamlet murmurs, one might expect to stumble on "Cain's jawbone, that did the first murther." (Mack 58)

It is not until Hamlet gives up the pursuit of revenge and turns to providence for help that he can relieve the great pressure attached to the magnitude and difficulty of his task. In doing so, Hamlet, "integrat[ing] dying as the unavoidable part of life with which it ends, becomes capable thereby of reshaping his attitude toward the future" (Eissler 241). It is not that Hamlet has "suddenly become religious; he has been religious all through the play. The point is that he has now learned, and accepted, the boundaries in which action, human judgment, are enclosed" (Mack 56). He no longer seeks to play at God, taking the ills of the world on his fragile shoulders, but learns "there are limits to the before and after that human reason can comprehend" (57). He releases himself from his great burdens and leaves the problem in God's hands as he waits calmly for the divine plan for punishing the wicked to unfold itself. Hamlet's answer being centered in his reliance on Christian providence, he is convinced that Claudius will meet his death through God's justice. ["There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will-" (5.2.10-11).] Instead of
seeing himself as a "scourge and minister," he discovers that by accepting his place in God's providential plan, the revenge will take care of itself:

There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. (5.2.166-69)

In his speech to Horatio, we see Hamlet "as a man who is free of neurotic doubts, no longer divided within himself, and with a mentality that makes him capable of acting directly on reality" (Eissler 412). Andrews is direct when he says, "Hamlet seems as ready to kill as Claudius seems ripe to die" (90). In order for Hamlet to be God's instrument, he needs to prepare, to ready himself to accept his role in the divine plan. It may be a readiness to die for a just cause, but it is also a readiness to live a spiritual life that reflects a state of grace and truth. Ironically, Polonius' advice, "This above all--to thine own self be true" (1.3.78), touches on the essential truth that Shakespeare has Hamlet discover. He no longer tries to manipulate the revenge on his own, nor initiate any further action to kill Claudius. He is prepared to allow Claudius' death to come about as it will. As the Gravedigger says: "But if the water comes to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself" (5.1.16.) Hamlet, by not actively pursuing revenge, but allowing the situation to present itself to him, would not be premeditating, with malice aforethought, Claudius' death.

Hamlet appears to show no concern for his inactivity now; it is no longer an issue for him. "He has come from the 'now' of passion," says Andrews, "to the 'now' of tranquil acquiescence--from 'To be . . .?' to 'Let be'" (91). This is not
to say that revenge has lost any urgency for Hamlet, "[b]ut since a man may kill
and be killed in the time it takes to say 'one,' there is no reason to hurry" (Fly
270). Hamlet no longer feels responsible for making revenge happen, or
delaying it for that matter. He has relinquished these responsibilities to God. It
is Hamlet's job to prepare himself for the role he has been chosen to play in
Claudius's end. Hamlet fully intends to act when the opportunity is made
available to him. Hamlet believes that his task of revenge, being in God's
hands, is inevitable, and Claudius's death will come in due time: to this
"favour" Claudius must (also) come. Hamlet is resolute in his words to Horatio
about Claudius:

He that hath killed my king and whored my mother,
Popped in between th'election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage - is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? (5.2.66-70)

Hamlet has evolved to a state of acceptance of himself and his mortality. He
never feared for his physical safety, whether in the taking of his own life, or
dying like a soldier in battle for a noble cause; killing had always been for him a
question of conscience based on humanistic thought and Christian doctrine
that condemn private revenge as immoral and un-Christian. Hamlet has now
come to terms with his conscience, accepting that his soul will be damned if he
"let[s] this canker of our nature come / in further evil" (5.2.70-71). Hamlet has come to a reconciliation between his true nature and his responsibility to his
father's memory through the perceived omnipotence of the supernatural. In the
context of a psychoanalytical framework, Bernthal suggests that Hamlet gives up his struggle to find his "self" and "stops viewing life as a riddle in need of a solution" (49). "In relinquishing his search for the self," Bernthal continues, "Hamlet paradoxically becomes more real--more centered and powerful--than he ever was. In his final willingness to let go of his self, he finds it" (49). Hamlet has overcome his hesitation to kill Claudius, catching him at the moment of public guilt, not as an assassin, but as an instrument of God's will: a minister of heaven chosen to carry out His justice.

**What Shakespeare Knew**

Shakespeare has presented an extraordinary character in Hamlet, what Rosenberg calls "a social phenomenon, . . . the most polyphonic of dramatic characters" (92). Northrop Frye describes the complexity of Hamlet's mind as a "complete universe in itself, ranging from hints of a divinity that shapes our ends to a melancholy sense of the unbearable loathsomeness of physical life, and whose actions range from delicate courtesy to shocking brutality" (*Fools of Time* 39). Here we have the true Renaissance man, the "man for all seasons," the man Wilson calls "one of the greatest and most fascinating of Shakespeare's creations; a study in genius" (219). If any theatrical invention could fulfill the expectations of the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, it should be Shakespeare's Hamlet. And yet when man is pushed to his limits, his back firmly against the wall, Shakespeare knew that even the most noble may resort to baser instincts to attain relief. As Lewis contends, Shakespeare has
presented "an admirably heroic youth driven to vengeance by an irresistible impulse" (90).27

At the moment of being informed of his own death, Hamlet kills in the throes of unmitigated rage, committing what must be considered a mortal sin in the eyes of the Church. With Hamlet's considerable deliberations in his soliloquies, with the knowledge of his father being taken "[w]ith all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May" (3.3.80-81) whose spirit is now suffering the tortuous fires of his prison-house, and with delaying Claudius' death until he finds him in "some act / That has no relish of salvation in't . . . that his soul may be damned and black / As hell" (3.3.92-95), Hamlet had to be stricken with "bestial oblivion" to discard the damnable consequences his soul would incur for killing Claudius under such circumstances. Hamlet is afflicted with what Elliot calls "hate, proud hate (for his uncle), close to the very 'heart' of his complex 'mystery'" (102-03). Man's reason takes a back seat to his passion, and he experiences what Prosser called "the surrender of reason, the surrender at least to dangerous rashness and at the most to actual madness" (93).

While under great stress, man will strike out from the part of his psyche (the "id" in Freudian terms28) that contains his most primitive instincts. The savagery that Hamlet displays in his extreme abuse of Ophelia, his attack on his mother in her chamber, his ruthlessness toward Rosencrantz and Gildenstern, and his cruel words for the praying King, that Johnson found "too horrible to be read or to be uttered," can all be attributed to a mind corrupted by
thoughts of revenge. Hamlet's mind is "tainted" and "thinking does make it so" (2.2.248). In the Elizabethan perspective, the evil nature of personal blood-revenge seizes the revenger's mind and soul and produces thoughts and actions that lead to profound tragedy; Hamlet has come to his discovery of his fate too late.29 According to Bowers, "Any human agent used by God to visit wrath and to scourge evil by evil was already condemned" ("Minister and Scourge" 743). Hamlet's "disclaiming from a purposed (italics mine) evil" (5.2.186) to free him from blame for mistakenly killing the wrong man, would still be premeditated murder in the first degree.30 It was standard Elizabethan religious practice, Bowers maintains, that God punished sin by "arousing the conscience of an individual to a sense of guilt and remorse, which might in extraordinary cases grow so acute as to lead to madness" (743). Perhaps the "sore distraction" Hamlet tells Laertes he was punished with was this "madness." Hamlet proclaims it as madness and denies that what he had done was in his true nature:

What I have done
That might your nature, honour, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. (5.2.176-83)

It would follow that the "purposed evil" for vengeance against his hated uncle had taken over Hamlet's arm as well as his soul. Hamlet must pay for his indiscretions, his deadly errors of vengeful passion, with his own life "for
Heaven's displeasure at his private revenge" (Bowers, "Minister and Scourge" 746). Gardner reflects on the irony that the villain of the revenge tragedy is unaware that he "invites his destroyer to destroy him" (44). The greater irony is that "[o]nce invited, the hero descends with alacrity to the moral level of his opponent. The vengeance when it comes is as hideous as the original crime, or even more hideous, and the moral feelings of the audience are confused between satisfaction and outrage" (44).

Hamlet undergoes maturation, a character change, that allows him to achieve his goal of killing Claudius, but not necessarily as the act of revenge for his father's death. Through what he believes to be God's divine guidance, Hamlet enters a dueling match with Laertes and ends up defending himself against Claudius's treachery by killing his attackers. It may be helpful to briefly repeat the sequence of events that brings closure to Hamlet's problem: With Laertes' confession that "the King's to blame" for the poisonings (5.2.274), Hamlet seeks revenge for being poisoned himself by stabbing Claudius with the envenomed sword: "Then, venom, to thy work" (275). It is likely that Hamlet does not intend to mortally wound Claudius with his sword, but wishes Claudius to die of the same poison that was used on him. After Hamlet stabs him, Claudius exclaims, "O, yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt" (277). Hamlet then takes revenge for his mother's murder by forcing Claudius to drink from the poisoned cup. It may be assumed that since Old Hamlet was also poisoned by Claudius, Laertes' "He is justly served; / It is a poison tempered by himself"
(282-84) might symbolically apply to revenge taken for Hamlet's father's being poisoned as well, although Old Hamlet is never mentioned in the scene.

It is the manner in which Hamlet kills Claudius that distinguishes him as a revenger. First, it must be made clear that Claudius is unarmed and defenseless against him. If, for example, Hamlet's sword was free from poison and the cup from which his mother drank was empty, it is unlikely that Hamlet would have killed the King as he has refrained from doing until now. Hamlet is in no imminent danger from Claudius and has no further reason to defend himself against him. Hamlet is already poisoned and informed by Laertes that he is doomed. Claudius is rendered helpless when Laertes confesses his, and the King's, treachery. Killing Claudius twice, so to speak, when Hamlet could have spared his life and brought him to legal justice, emphasizes Shakespeare's determination to show us revenge as an extremely powerful agent of human nature. Hamlet continues to resist the legal mechanisms of the period, not because he believe he can not be successful, -- he is obviously aware that no one, not the King's guards nor any member of the State has moved to protect Claudius -- but because he must abide with a primitive responsiveness to the beastial part of his nature. Elizabethans believed that "revenge is a desire to requite an evil received by returning an evil" (Bowers, Revenge Tragedy 35), "which hath some colour to worke iniurie, for iniurie" (Norden in Bowers 35). We can see that Hamlet, caught in the passion of the moment, succumbs to the trait that allies a moral man to his beastial nature,
and provokes into action his primitive instinct for revenge. Prosser's study places the responsibility for Hamlet's behavior squarely on his own shoulders: "the command to murder is as malign as we sense it to be, and Hamlet himself is to blame for his descent into savagery" (248). There is a moral condemnation of Hamlet within the sympathetic context of a hero, himself, fighting against evil, and intellectually conceptualizing how this world should be. The Elizabethan dilemma of the revenger seems to be embedded in the human psyche. Prosser says that "all men hunger for revenge. The defiant refusal to submit to injury, the desire to assert one's identity by retaliation, the gnawing ache to assault injustice by giving measure for measure--these are reflected in our daily responses to even the mildest of insults" (249). Morgan tells us that Prosser's Hamlet "must not" revenge, but does it in a savage rage, and "since the common passion of mankind makes revenge inevitable, it is not his fault" (48).

In any case, there is an inference here that within the context of the social contract, humankind can survive with dignity only by assenting to societal authority, and "that the unrestrained private will leads inevitably to anarchy" (Prosser 249). Hamlet has chosen to respond, at first restrained by causes in his nature, but ultimately propelled by his instinctual cravings, as a blood-revenger.
A little boy captured a fly.
Being a curious child
He took the fly apart,
Trying to understand how
It was put together.
Well, he pulled the fly into pieces,
And had the wings, and the legs,
And the body, and the head . . .
But wondered where the fly had gone.

(A Sufi Tale)

Chapter IV

CONCLUSION

"Hamlet is a play of choices" (Cohen 1), and for readers of the play, time allows many interpretations to be considered at once. As readers we can weigh diverse and contradictory meanings of character and action until we come upon a satisfactory understanding of the play. Readers of the play can, at their leisure, bring one of the many interpretations to bear on a particular speech or behavior that fits with the overall meaning they have given to the play. The interpretation can be reconsidered and changed as they progress further into the play and discover new and conflicting meaning. With time, we might read, and re-read, knowing that "[i]n a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (Eliot 4) before settling on a suitable interpretation. Not so for theater-goers; they do not have this luxury. The interpretation has been chosen by the theater company, and if the interpretation is well conceived, unified, and coherent, and the play is well rehearsed and
polished, there should be little confusion to the meaning of their production. Each theatrical production is a distinct set of choices that comprise a single interpretation. The director and the actors must choose an interpretation that yields the characters consistent and believable. And since Shakespeare had written his plays for a stage audience, and not for critics and scholars, the most sensible approach to the meaning of the play might be how it related to its Elizabethan audience; we must try to understand Hamlet's delays in this light as well.

If we abide by our opening definition of delay, which accounts for Hamlet's actions from the time he hears the Ghost's commands for revenge to the play's ending, we must conclude that Hamlet does delay killing Claudius for the murder of his father. This is not to say that his delays are unwarranted, unjustified, or insupportable. It simply means that Hamlet did not kill his uncle on the night he was commanded to take revenge by his father's ghost, but waited almost three months to accomplish his task. Hamlet's delays are only noticeable to Hamlet, for the most part, through the first half of the play. Claudius, and the audience, become aware of Hamlet's delays primarily because of Hamlet's own distressing reactions to them. His procrastinations are due to various personality traits and several external events operating within the context of Hamlet being a Renaissance prince. He is gravey aware throughout the play that he has not taken timely action against Claudius and is plagued by guilt for his delays. However guilt-ridden, he is unprepared to kill
Claudius until certain conditions of conscience are satisfied in his own mind. Although the various, and sometimes contradictory, critical theories of Hamlet's delay provide invaluable insights into the nature and meaning of Shakespeare's hero, there is no single explanation that can reasonably account for Hamlet's delays throughout the action of the play; no single explanation can account for the complexity of the human psyche. Hamlet is neither entirely too sensitive nor high strung, intellectual nor contemplative, nor melancholy throughout, although he displays something of all these tendencies during the course of the play. Shakespeare has shown us much in the play that is inconsistent with any of these interpretations standing on its own.

In the light of Goethe's finding, Hamlet is extremely delicate in sensibility, the image of a delicate vase, and he is too weak to accomplish his task. Represented by Goethe as "[a] beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, it sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off" (qtd. in Furness 273). Hamlet, then, is subjected to an intolerable fate. Concerning Hamlet's deliberation, Schlegel called the play, a "tragedy of thought . . . crippling the power of acting," while Coleridge espoused a narrow psychological interpretation where Hamlet's entire motivation is directed from his inner life. Goethe did not account for the incidents of inner strength and brave actions Hamlet undertakes throughout the course of the play, and Schlegel and Coleridge, although identifying an important aspect of Hamlet's personality affecting his delaying, did not consider
how external events in the play affect Hamlet's internal motivation. Coleridge's position that Hamlet's delay was caused by his excessive reflections paralyzing his will to act adds greatly to our knowledge of the man, strengthening his case for intellect as a controlling factor in Hamlet's character, but it does not fully account for Hamlet's delays. Bradley argued that Hamlet is a melancholic personality prone to depression, and his mother's betrayal is so shocking that it propels him toward "bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature" (95). Hamlet, plagued by his melancholic condition, therefore cannot bring himself to take deliberate actions to revenge his father's death.

Hamlet is certainly melancholic when we first meet him, but his condition dissipates as Hamlet progresses through the play—How else could one account for the energy Hamlet acquires after he is commanded to revenge his father's death? It is clear that no one label can be applied to account comprehensively for all the emotional and psychological dynamics that are at play in Hamlet's delays. Commenting on the lack of a unified theory to account for Hamlet's behavior throughout the play, H.N. Hudson holds, "It is easy to invest with plausibility almost any theory respecting him, but very hard to make any theory comprehend the whole subject; and while all are impressed with the truth of the character, no one is satisfied with another's explanation of it" (qtd. in Furness 178).

Although Shakespeare removed the physical barriers to make Claudius accessible to Hamlet, Shakespeare also complicated Hamlet's task by creating,
(1) the complex and ambiguous relationship triangle involving Hamlet, Gertrude, and the Ghost, (2) Hamlet's symbiotic relationship with his mother, a fusion that alerted Freud and Jones to employ their Oedipal hypothesis, and (3) Hamlet's spiritual, religious, and political philosophies evolving in response to changes in Renaissance thought and opinion. Each of the above interpretations, mosaics spun through different methodologies and supportable to varying degrees through the text, can better serve to enrich our outlook rather than suffice as a unified theory to account for Hamlet's delays. It seems more appropriate to say, Hamlet delays on different occasions, and for different reasons, in his attempt to resolve his dilemma of revenge.

Hamlet is a mystery, or better an illusion "who is at once mad and the sanest of geniuses, at once a procrastinator and a vigorous man of action, at once a miserable failure and the most adorable of heroes" (Wilson 229). And it is precisely his sensitive, contemplative, melancholic, and impulsive tendencies vying for prominence in the forefront of his personality that places him in such a hopeless quandary. Hamlet cannot sustain his moods long enough to take decisive action in any of the directions his reluctant mind would take him.

Unlike the hero of the Ur-Hamlet who was "primarily a personified craving for revenge, . . . belonging not to real life but to the conventional world of the old revenge tragedy" (Lewis 89), for Shakespeare's hero "the conventional standards of the revenge tragedy would be thrown overboard" (90). If we are to judge Hamlet by these standards, then he must be found
guilty of not being the ideal revenger; he delays what he should have done at once. In the world of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the delays of the Renaissance Prince are, for the most part, understandable and justifiable. In our living world, can one person have so many dominant traits expressing feeling, thought, and action? Must these traits be contiguous and complimentary, or can they be competing and contradictory? Can they all exist in one person at the same time? When unlike traits are brought together in Hamlet to account for his developing personality, they express the full spectrum of thought and range of emotions we experience as human beings. Although Shakespeare's "meta-psychological" approach may resist the logic of scholarly analysis, it is, most assuredly, permissible in a piece of literary genius. Hamlet is a theatrical composite, not a live person. Wilson tells us that from a psychological perspective a character like Hamlet may seem like "a monster of inconsistency." He goes on to assure us that it "does not matter, if, as here, it also seems to spectators in the theatre to be more convincingly life-like than any other character in literature" (219). As an artistic creation, the character need not conform to the realism of an individual human being, but may serve as a symbol for Shakespeare's ideas about the human condition that he believes exist in the world. Gardner elegantly describes what she believes to be Shakespeare's vision:

Hamlet is the quintessence of European man, who holds that man is 'ordained to govern the world according to equity and righteousness with an upright heart,' and not to renounce the world and leave it to its corruption. By that conception of man's
duty and destiny he is involved in those tragic dilemmas with which our own age is so terribly familiar. For how can man secure justice except by committing injustice, and how can he act without outraging the very conscience which demands that he should act? (50)

"In the making of Hamlet," Wilson concludes, "Shakespeare's task was not to produce a being psychologically explicable or consistent, but one who would evoke the affection, the wonder and the tears of his audience, and would yet be accepted as entirely human" (220). Shakespeare's Hamlet is the finest example of such a literary character. Hamlet is a character sprung from a playwright's imagination and created in the service of poetry and dramatic tension to entertain and, perhaps, instruct. Although he may be inconsistent as a living man, Hamlet has been, consistently, a hero of tragic stature in the hearts of audiences for the past four hundred years.
I was accompanying a friend on a long journey. Shortly on the way, I took and peeled a round fruit. I offered my friend a portion to share with me. He longingly bit into the wedge, but grimaced with sharp annoyance.

"This is a terrible orange," he finally blurted out. "That's not an orange," I retorted, "it's a grapefruit!" Recovering, he took another bite and said happily, "What a perfectly fine grapefruit."

The tree of life is also filled with grapefruits. If you are always set for oranges, you will inevitably be disappointed.

(Based on a psychotherapeutic metaphor contributed by Peter N. Alevizos, Ph.D.)

Chapter V

AFTERWORD: HAMLET'S DELAY REVISITED

How would it go if Shakespeare, or a modern director, began the play in the middle of Act V, perhaps at the point where the present stage directions indicate: "Enter Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, Osric, and all the State, and Attendants with foils and gauntlets," after line 170? All would go on exactly as written, but after Horatio's, "And let me speak to the unknowing world / How these things came about" (331-32), we "flashback" to the beginning of the play and continue from there as if Horatio was re-telling the whole story. [Might not this be close to where Horatio would have to begin Hamlet's story to attempt to explain "to the unknowing / How these things came about" (5.2.332-33)?] What would this accomplish? I will not vouch for its theatrical effect (although it might turn out surprising well), but in terms of Hamlet's delay, it would address much scholarly criticism of Hamlet putting off his killing of Claudius in revenge for
murdering his father. It would simply mean that Hamlet would be presented at once as a man who does not delay, but immediately acts to revenge. This would significantly change the complexion of the character of Shakespeare's hero. Here, since his father is not mentioned, Hamlet is the primary revenger of his mother's death at the hands of Claudius. All doubt involving the Ghost's accusations that plagued Hamlet throughout the play would not be at issue. Claudius's crimes against Hamlet and (indirectly) against Gertrude are public events, and Hamlet knows his course. The scenario remains: Laertes confesses his, and the King's treachery (although we have yet to find out why an attempt on Hamlet's life is being made), and all the courtiers cry out, "Treason! treason!" (5.2.276). Hamlet, in revenge for his own poisoning, stabs Claudius with his envenomed point and charges, "Then, venom, to thy work" (275). Being only wounded, the King shrieks, "O, yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt" (278). Hamlet, now in revenge for his mother's death, forces the poison drink down Claudius's throat with, "Follow my mother" (279). The point here is that if appropriate reasons to delay do not exist in Hamlet's mind, he has not the slightest hesitation to act. He reacts "instantaneously" to a crime in progress in our theoretical scenario, taking the law into his own hands, and becomes the revenger of his own, and his mother's, murder.

In the end, the reasons to kill Claudius in the duelling scene have superseded Hamlet's original reason of avenging the death of his father. Certainly, one can see in Hamlet's suiting the action to the word: "Here, thou
incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane" (5.2.276), his reference to his father's death and the incest that surrounds it. One can also view the fact that because poison was used in the deaths of both Old Hamlet and Claudius, a connection can be made from the one act of revenge to the other. Looking back from this perspective, one might better recognize that until the closing moments of the play, Hamlet was justified in delaying Claudius' death for the crime of killing Hamlet's father. It makes equal sense that Hamlet never revenges, or only indirectly revenges, his father's death because the murderer is killed by him in revenge for another crime.
ENDNOTES

1. Frye relates that when he was an undergraduate his Shakespeare teacher assigned the essay topic, "Minor Problems in Hamlet," "by which he meant all the 'problems' except two: how mad was Hamlet, and why did he delay?" (On Shakespeare 84).

2. All references to Hamlet are taken from The Oxford Shakespeare edited by G.R. Hibbard.

3. Hamlet follows the Ghost, verbally spars with his uncle at every turn, emotionally torments Ophelia and his mother, stabs Polonius, gingerly sends his school friends to their death, is first to leap upon the pirate ship, and confronts Laertes, first in Ophelia's grave and later in a duel to the death. Bradley remarks that the "sentimental view" "ignores the hardness and cynicism which were indeed no part of his nature, but yet, in this crisis of his life, are indubitably present and painfully marked" (81).

4. We must keep in mind, however, that thirty years have passed, according to the gravedigger, since the death of Fortinbras' father at the hands of Old Hamlet. It has taken Fortinbras a conspicuously long period of time to determine that the present is ripe for his revenge.

5. Appearing in The Mirror, April 18, 1780, (quoted by Furness, Variorum Hamlet II, 148.)

6. Quinn points out that Trilling in "Freud and Literature," a critique of the psychoanalytical position, holds that Freud and Jones do not have the grounds to relate the play to Shakespeare's life, and the "meaning of art cannot be reduced to the intention, conscious or unconscious, of its author, even assuming that one has proved, as Dr. Jones has not, that such an intention was there" (39).


8. All further reference to "Frye" will designate the work of Roland Frye.

9. Bowers references these "heroes" of Hamlet, The Spanish Tragedy, Antonio's Revenge, and Titus Andronicus, as involved with "problems of life
and death and of the mysteries of a soul in torment" with the theme, "justice for murder" (110).

10. Gardner makes the point that "In trying to set Hamlet back in its own age, I seem to have found in it an image of my own time" (51). Perhaps because of Shakespeare's genius, this can't be avoided.


Heisenberg developed a theory of the principle of indeterminacy, or uncertainty as it relates to measuring the position and velocity of an electron in motion. It relates that the energy given off by a ray of light needed to illuminate the electron, causes it to change velocity. The very means taken to measure the position of the electron, changes that position.

12. Wilson holds that "[Shakespeare] wrote for all time; but to cast our historic sense behind us as we read him is to do him much wrong" (59).

13. See Rosencrantz's "The single and peculiar life" speech (3.3.11-23) which emphasizes the profound influence a monarch's death, "cease of majesty," has on all under his or her reign.

14. The quote Bowers uses indicates, in Prosser's view, a posture of self-defense and not revenge. Prosser quotes Perkins to illustrate his ethical position toward killing, which fosters an absence of malice and desire for revenge:

I. It must be done incontinent and forthwith so soone as ever violence is offered. For if there be delay, and it come afterward, it loses the name of a just defence, & becomes a revenge, a rising of prepense malice, as the Lawyers use to speake. II. There must be an intention, not to revenge principally, or to kill, but only to defend himselfe. III. There must be a just and equall proportion of weapons; therefore it is no just defence to shoote a naked man through with a musket, or other piece of ordinance, when he offers violence" "Cases of Conscience," *The Works of William Perkins*, London, 1613, II, 120. (In Prosser n. 20)

15. The story of the play dates back to the twelfth century Scandinavian legendary hero, Amleth, who appeared in Saxo Grammaticus' *Historiae Danicae*. This tale of blood, common to Norse saga and incorporating the hero's assumption of an "antic disposition," was retold by Francois de Belleforest in the fifth volume of his *Histoires tragiques* in 1570. Although the events of the plots may vary slightly, the important thread that weaves
them into Shakespeare's theme is the revenge story. Saxo tells an "heroic tale of the heroic age in northern Europe" (Hibbard 9) where the Prince of his story fulfills his duty of avenging his father's murder without the slightest vacillation from his committed path. Unlike his Renaissance counterpart, there is "never a doubt as to what he must do, he moves inexorably to the accomplishment of his purpose" (9).

Belleforest's account of the action is similar to Saxo's, with several additions that, according to Hibbard, "leave their mark on Shakespeare's tragedy" (10). These involve incest, the suspicion that Gertrude "inspired the murder in order to enjoy the pleasures of her adulterous relationship with Fengon without restrictions or restraint," and the idea of Amleth as a "victim of melancholy" as a way rendering him "highly sensitive to impressions from without" as it relates to the idea of divination, which Belleforest apparently had difficulty with. As a Christian writer, he could not approve of personal revenge, and prefaces his story with the "Argument" that he wrote history based on moral and religious grounds, which Hibbard characterizes as the "providential idea of history dominant at the time he was writing" (11). Hibbard goes on to say that Belleforest deduced that the "greatest lesson to be learned from the past is that though God's vengeance may be slow it is absolutely sure" (11).

There is more reason to believe the reasonableness of Hamlet's delay in the previous stories of Saxo and Belleforest because it was publicly revealed that Claudius had killed Hamlet's father and usurped the crown. The delay, however, derived exclusively from external events. He did not face the problem of a ghost relaying the information. In the previous accounts, Claudius murdered Hamlet's father, and according to tradition it is the sacred duty of the son to avenge his father's death. Any delay would not have been based upon Hamlet having to prove, at least to himself, that Claudius committed the crime.

16. Claudius urging Hamlet to remain at Elsinore instead of "going back to school in Wittenberg" (1.2.113) would indicate that Hamlet intended to return to school.

17. Hamlet makes three separate references to a month's time in this soliloquy.

18. Until this point in the third act, the audience would not know that two months have gone by since Hamlet's first appearance, and being caught up in the swift events of the play would take little notice of Hamlet's delay.

19. It should be recalled that it has taken Fortinbras, who some critics believe to be a role model for Hamlet, a good 30 years to find the right opportunity to attempt to "avenge" his father's death.

20. It should be remembered that Fortinbras, who is thought of as an avenger, along with Laertes, is primarily concerned with retaining the lands that
were taken from his father by Old Hamlet who is already dead. There is no indication in the text that Fortinbras is at all interested in killing Hamlet for his father's deed.

21. Hamlet has his own dictates to which he must adhere that are controlled by his moral nature and sense of honor, strictures, it seems, that are not compatible with the Ghost's timetable for revenge.

22. What may also be at work here to propel Hamlet forward is his unconscious, or intuitive perception of what the Ghost will say, evidenced by his later outcry, "O my prophetic soul!" (1.5.40) when told that his uncle murdered his father.

23. There is also an element here of impulsiveness and rashness, what Hamlet refers to as his being "passion's slave," which needs to be distinguished from true heroism.

24. The point is well made by Claudius to Laertes in the following interchange:

CLAUDIUS Good Laertes,
If you desire to know the certainty
Of your dear father's death, is't writ in your revenge
That, sweepstake, you will draw both friend and foe,
Winner and loser?

LAERTES None but his enemies.

CLAUDIUS Will you know them then? (4.5.140-46)
If it were not for Claudius' mental agility and shrewd manipulations, Laertes may have indeed killed the wrong man!

25. Although Shakespeare has been criticized for unwisely retaining Hamlet's feigned madness from his predecessors, Hamlet putting on an "antic disposition" serves as an apt emotional safety-valve for his near hysteria.

26. This can be contrasted with Laertes' rejection of his conscience, "And yet 'tis almost 'gainst my conscience" (5.2.248), in favor of his honor to keep his name "ungored".

27. The motif of joy and grief is presented at the start of the play with Claudius' "With mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage,/ In equal scale weighing delight and dole . . ." (1.2.12-13). The play draws to a closed with Fortinbras, "For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune" (5.2.340).

28. In another display of the power of "honor," Hamlet forbids Horatio to drink from the poisoned cup to commit suicide at the play's end. Horatio
compares himself to an "antique Roman" seeking an honorable death "in
preference to life on conditions [he] regarded as dishonourable" (Hibbard n.
351). Hamlet, for his part, instructs Horatio to "report me and my cause
aright" to not leave a "wounded name" behind him (5.2.292 and 297).

29. Laertes' excessive grief results in rage never tempered by reason; he
doesn't require excessive passion to act, his rage always smolders and can
flare up at the slightest provocation.

30. According to Frye there is sufficient evidence that the Elizabethan audience
would view Claudius as a tyrant. Frye provides an interesting discussion on
the "right of officials, nobles and princes to resist and even oppose a
tyrant" (71) as part of the ongoing political debate in Elizabethan England.
Notably, Thomas Bilson, who was assigned by Elizabeth "the difficult task
of bringing the traditional Tudor doctrine of non-resistance into line with the
new realities of the fifteen-eighties" (71), asserted that since the English
monarchy is hereditary and not elected "he must be endured" and "may not
be deposed," adding that if an elected monarch "shows himself unworthy of
the regiment" he may be deposed by those who elected him (Bilson in
Frye 73). It is curious that Shakespeare does not inform the audience until
Act V that the Danish monarchy is elected. Here Hamlet complains to
Horatio that Claudius "Popped in between th'election and my hopes . . ."
(5.2.267). Obviously, Hamlet is aware, from the beginning, of the political
arrangement of the government.

31. His feigned madness turns out to be a miscalculation, raising only
suspicion in Claudius that there is something behind Hamlet's strange
behavior. (See also n.25, page 113)


33. I owe this point, along with the useful Macduff example, to Professor
Robert B. Schwartz, English Chair, Oregon State University.

34. Hamlet believes himself at the mercy of his passions. To illuminate this
flaw, Hamlet speaks of Horatio as a just and well-balanced man whom
Hamlet equates with the Stoic ideal in the following lines:

For thou hast been
As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hath ta'en with equal thanks. (3.2.60-63)

Hamlet goes on to say that it is in a man like Horatio that "blood and
judgement (passion and reason) are so well commingled" (3.2.65). Hamlet
is convinced he is a slave to his passions and, unlike Horatio, his actions
are uncontrollable and dangerous. In the graveyard scene where Hamlet leaps into Ophelia's grave in a fit of passion to grapple with Laertes, he makes it clear in his warning to Laertes that "I have something in me dangerous, / Which let the wisest fear" (5.1.252-53).

35. Death has always been in Hamlet's consciousness: Claudius's pronouncement about losing a father, Hamlet referring to man as a quintessence of dust (2.2.304), and his ruminating about death in his soliloquies. It is especially evident in his speech to Claudius in which he describes "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.31) to emphasize man's mortality. Hamlet comes to a full realization of the inevitability of death in the graveyard scene as part of God's revelation.

36. Hamlet's statement can be seen in psychoanalytic terms as sublimation, a redirection of Hamlet's primitive impulses to socially acceptable behavior, as an attempt to satisfy his need for a strong father figure.

37. The statement was given in justification for Ophelia being the victim of a drowning rather than a suicide. The reader is also reminded that premeditated murder, or murder with malice aforethought, was considered illegal in Elizabethan England, and that the only possible private retaliation tolerated was the instantaneous reaction to an injury. The latter was judged as manslaughter and a felony, but carried the possibility of royal pardon, whereas private revenge was considered a "retaliation," and could never be considered for redemption in the eyes of the law.

38. We also see in Hamlet's attitude the more orthodox Elizabethan position held by the Church and State upholding the code that the most wicked of sinners must be left to divine judgment, "leaving all vengeance to God, which saith: 'Vengeance is mine'" (Becon in Prosser 13). Hamlet allows himself to be "ruled" by the Heavenly Father with heartfelt assurance that he will be the "organ" of his own peace. [See (4.3.60-62), where Claudius gives his assurance that Laertes will be the instrument of Hamlet's death.]

39. Lewis points out that Hamlet's question to Horatio of whether it is right to kill ("is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?") was not included in the First Quarto, but written as part of his revision of the play for the Second Quarto (29-30). Hamlet was plagued from the onset with questions of conscience about whether it was his place to premeditate killing another human being, whether it was "right for him to take upon himself the vengeance of the Eternal" (29). Possibly wanting to emphasize Hamlet's concern with the ambiguity attached to the moral scruples of such a dilemma, Shakespeare revised his text to include an added obstacle:
Was Hamlet bound to kill Claudius? Just as Horatio has no response to Hamlet's question, Shakespeare's audience was sure to better appreciate Hamlet's difficulties.

40. How far can Shakespeare's play be separated from the traditional blood-revenge tragedy when we realize he had incorporated eight violent deaths, incest and adultery, a mad woman, and a ghost, who while King, had suffered a death of indescribable horror?

41. The Freudian id, commonly represented as the ultimate hedonist, governed only by the pleasure principle, "is regarded as the deepest component of the psyche, the true unconscious" (Reber 339). It is described as "the primitive, animalistic, instinctual element, a pit of roiling, libidinous energy demanding immediate satisfaction" (339). The seat of our rash and irrational desires, society expects us to keep this primitive side of our nature under control.

42. The same can be said of Laertes. In the scene where Claudius reveals his plan to kill Hamlet we see in Laertes many characteristics of a common blood-revenger. Laertes, believing he has a sacred duty to avenge his father's death, becomes overcome with the passion of revenge. He resorts to treacherous means to accomplish his ends. In his overwhelming grief he cries,

    To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
    Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
    I dare damnation! (4.5.131-33)

He is so incensed with Hamlet for killing his father that he would undertake "to cut his throat i' the church!" (4.7.103). He brings a poison from France to anoint his sword as part of his premeditation to take revenge.

    Laertes suppresses his conscience and achieves his revenge.
    Consequently, he is (along with Claudius) "hoist with his own petard" (3.4.207). Laertes, however, accepts his just fate as the honorable man he is: "I am justly killed with mine own treachery" (5.2.261). It is due to his natural goodness that noble Laertes is permitted to confess his misdeeds and exchange forgiveness with Hamlet. And it is due to the evil nature of revenge that a goodly man will proclaim its ignoble cause.

    Laertes is a man of noble character who becomes a pawn of evil because of his passionate desire for revenge—it poisons his goodness and turns him into a poisoner of others.

43. See my discussion of murder versus manslaughter according to Elizabethan law on pages 40-41 and 52.

44. See Morgan for what he calls a "conscience" theory of the play whereby Hamlet does not take personal revenge by killing Claudius, but "slightly
Hamlet does not take personal revenge by killing Claudius, but "slightly wounds Claudius with the poisoned sword point, the court rushes to Claudius' defense as Hamlet drops the sword--and watches mutely as he offers Claudius the poisoned cup. Eventually taking the cup, Claudius drinks--and 'kills' himself" (48).

45. At the risk of oversimplifying an obviously complex idea, I would like to suggest that perhaps Hamlet may have had little choice but to respond the way he did to his emotionally difficult situation. Hamlet's delaying his revenge may be seen as an effort by the ego to restrain the id from discharging quantities of energy in the form of excitement and tension building in Hamlet's psyche. The delays would signify the id's submission to the influence of the ego to maintain a homeostasis, or constancy, in the face of the great disturbances Hamlet was forced to encounter. Because of the increasing strength of the emotions that were forced into repression, small amounts of energy had to be discharged or displaced from one object to another when the pressure became too great for the ego to control. According to Hall, in A Primer of Freudian Psychology, Freud took the position that

the id is the primary subjective reality, the inner world that exists before the individual has had experience of the external world. Not only are the instincts and reflexes inborn, but the images that are produced by tension states may also be innate. This means that a hungry baby can have an image of food without having to learn to associate food with hunger. Freud believed that experiences that are repeated with great frequency and intensity in many individuals of successive generations become permanent deposits in the id. (26-27)

It would hold that, in psychoanalytic terms, the id, archaic from the standpoint of both racial history (one thinks of Jung's concept of the Collective Unconscious), and the individual's life experiences demands gratification for blood-revenge, an acceptable part of our primitive nature,* passed down through Hamlet's warrior lineage and through the emotional catharsis it provides Hamlet's own psyche. And eventually "[t]hings fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (Yeats, "The Second Coming").

*The historical account of blood-revenge, summarized earlier in this paper, I believe, supports this contention.

46. See Note 3 on page 104.

47. Draper (see Chapter xi) takes great pains to show that Hamlet was not an
prince-philosopher would make Hamlet an impossible tragic hero" (167).

Draper holds that Hamlet is not innately incapable of action, and "though
Shakespeare might have motivated his delay by representing him as too
studious, the dramatist in actual fact did not do so, and, had he done so,
Hamlet would have been a far less appealing figure to the Elizabethan
audience" (173).

I do not understand how Bradley can attribute the condition of melancholia
to account for Hamlet's energy as well as his lethargy. He describes his
energy as "those quick decided actions" that produce "healthy impulses" (99).
I find no evidence that the above are symptoms of melancholia.

Today the term would refer to "a pronounced depression with feelings of
foreboding and a general insensitivity to stimulation" (Reber 428). In fact,
when a major depressive episode is diagnosed with Melancholic features,
the patient suffers, (1) a loss of pleasure in all or almost all activities, (2) a
lack of reactivity to usually pleasureable stimuli (doesn't feel much better,
even temporarily, when something good happens), and (3) possible
excessive or inappropriate guilt (DSM-III, 215).

With due respect to the efforts of Freud/Jones, Erlich, and others who
have ventured forth with full blown psychoanalytical interpretations, it is not
likely that a competent diagnostician would be able to come to any
reasonable conclusions based upon the limited information about Hamlet
(or Shakespeare) available in the play.

As a illustration of the difficulty of the task of diagnosis even in clinical practice where information about the patient's history and present
functioning is assumed more available, I would like to describe two
recognizable syndromes exhibiting much of the same symptoms that
Hamlet displays while in his pursuit of revenge. The multiple personality
syndrome is defined as a "disorder in which the usual integrity of one's
personality becomes so fractionated that two (or more) relatively
independent subpersonalities emerge" (Reber 458). We can best
understand the condition as an abnormality of degree, rather than of kind.

People normally show dramatic changes in behavioral styles under various
social interactions and roles; "the pathological condition is marked by
circumstances in which these varied manifestations of self become so
bifurcated that the sense of underlying integrity is lost" (458). It is a kind of
hysteria with usual symptoms of functional paralysis, but used figuratively
for the "sense of a crippling or loss of effectiveness of cognitive processes"
(514).

Hysteria (now called histrionic personality type), being a general
classification, has an array of symptoms difficult to diagnose. Some that
have been cited most often include, hallucinations, sleep disorder and
dissociation. (The multiple personality is generally included under the
category of dissociative disorders as is hysteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*) The lack of understanding of the disorder "may, quite possibly, be due to the fact that there is no single disorder here at all. In all likelihood what we have is a variety of maladaptive behaviors each of which exists more or less independently of the others with the hysterical syndrome existing only in the mind of the diagnostician" (337). One thinks of a Coleridgean attempt at interpretation here.

Perhaps a challenging area for further research would be an interpretation of Hamlet's delay based on distinguishing a manic-depressive psychosis / bipolar disorder from the above.

50. I say "primarily" because by wounding Claudius with the poisoned sword, Hamlet is also revenging his own death. If Hamlet is only thinking about his mother's poisoning, having no regard for his own circumstances, he would forgo stabbing Claudius and use only the poisoned drink to kill him.

There is also no indication in the text that Hamlet was thinking of his father when he stabbed Claudius. One might take the position that it would be quite impossible for Hamlet to not think of his father at this moment after all his deliberation about revenge throughout the play. In our hypothetical situation, with the audience not being aware that Hamlet's father has been murdered, it makes sense to keep our attention on the characters present in the scene. When we come back full circle to this point in the play, we then might speculate on whether Hamlet ever takes revenge on Claudius for the murder of his father.
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