

# The Central Question of the Play

## Essay by Joel Sommer Littauer

Hamlet's tragedy is a tragedy of failure-the failure of a man placed in critical circumstances to deal successfully with those circumstances. In some ways, Hamlet reminds us of Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Hamlet and Brutus are both good men who live in trying times. Both are intellectual, even philosophical. Both men want to do the right thing. Both men intellectualize over what the right thing is. Neither man yields to passion. But here the comparison ends, for though both Brutus and Hamlet reflect at length over the need to act, Brutus is able immediately to act while Hamlet is not. Hamlet is stuck "thinking too precisely on th' event-".

Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark, has died suddenly. The dead king's brother, Claudius, marries Hamlet's mother and swiftly assumes the throne, a throne that Hamlet fully expected would be his upon the death of his father. Hamlet's father's ghost confronts Hamlet and tells him that his death was not natural, as reported, but instead, was murder. Hamlet swears revenge. But rather than swoop instantly to that revenge, Hamlet pretends to be insane in order to mask an investigation of the accusation brought by his father's ghost. Why Hamlet puts on this "antic disposition" and delays in killing Claudius is the central question of the play.

But Hamlet did not swear to his father's ghost that he, detective-like, would investigate. Hamlet swore revenge. And he has more than enough motivation to exact revenge.

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon-  
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? And is't not to be damned  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil? (Act 5, scene 2 . . . to Horatio)

Yet he delays. It is this delay in performing the act he has sworn to accomplish which leads to Hamlet's death. The poison on the tip of Laertes' sword is but a metaphor for the poison of procrastination which has been coursing through Hamlet's system throughout the play.

Hamlet's thoughts focus upon death rather than upon action. His words show an intense longing for death:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. (Act I, scene 2)

In Act 3, Scene 1 Hamlet restates this theme:  
To be, or not to be, that is the question-

The answer eludes Hamlet throughout the play, perhaps because it is the wrong question. Hamlet is alive and to be alive means 'to do,' not merely to be. It is his inability to 'do,' his tendency to reflect rather than to act which poisons Hamlet's resolve and causes his tragic death.

If the central question of the play is Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius immediately upon hearing the ghost's accusation? the easiest answer is that if Hamlet had done so, the play would have ended in Act I. And then *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* would be a tragedy of plot management.

In his 1904 work *Shakespearean Tragedy*,\* A. C. Bradley describes *Hamlet* as a play which includes eight violent deaths, adultery, a ghost, a mad woman, and a fight in a grave. Here are all the ingredients of a horror story. Bradley then asks the question, "But why in the world did not Hamlet obey the ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?" The answer to this question lies not in the fact that had Hamlet done so the play would have ended in the first act. The answer lies in the character of Hamlet. Specifically, what is it that prevents Hamlet from acting on his father's ghost's command? Let's look at some typical views.

Is it the fact that at that moment Claudius is surrounded by courtiers and his Swiss guard? No, for throughout the play Hamlet never refers to any external difficulty in approaching and killing Claudius. Hamlet states in Act IV, scene 4 that he has "...cause and will and strength and means To do't," and even Laertes who is less popular than Hamlet quite easily raises the people against the king.

Does Hamlet want to bring Claudius to public justice? Again, no. Hamlet arranges the play within the play not to convince others of Claudius's guilt, but to convince himself: "if 'a do blench, I know my course." (Act II, scene 2). Throughout the play, Hamlet never talks of public justice. He talks instead of violent death: "To quit him with this arm?" (Act 5, scene 2). Hamlet's mission and his purpose is to kill his uncle, not to bring him to the bar of justice.

Would killing Claudius bother Hamlet's conscience? Not at all. Hamlet may question the honesty of the ghost. He never questions his course if the ghost is real. On the contrary, Hamlet reproaches himself for not acting promptly: "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (Act 2, scene 2) and "How all occasions do inform against me," (Act 4, scene 4).

Does Hamlet lack courage? Apparently not. Hamlet rarely misses an opportunity to insult the king. Hearing a noise behind the arras in his mother's bedroom he whips out his sword and thrusts unhesitatingly through the curtain. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths without a second thought. When his ship is attacked by pirates, Hamlet is the first to board the pirate ship. He fights with Laertes in Ophelia's grave, duels with Laertes, and, dying himself, runs the king through completing his mission.

Does Hamlet simply substitute thought for action? As we have seen, Hamlet is a man of action. Why, then does he not act promptly in executing his father's ghost's command? A.C. Bradley offers this explanation: Hamlet has received a violent shock to his moral being. Hamlet adored his father; that father has met an untimely death.

So excellent a king, (Act I, scene 2)

His mother has shown what to Hamlet is a despicable nature-marrying almost immediately following Hamlet's father's death:

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason  
would have mourned longer. (Act I, scene 2)

and has married a man Hamlet finds utterly hateful and contemptible:

My father's brother, but no more like my father  
than I to Hercules. (Act I, scene 2)

Finally, there is the loss of the crown: "Popped in between th' election and my hopes," (Act V, scene 2). These, especially the disclosure of his mother's weak nature, poison Hamlet's mind and instill in Hamlet a despair of human nature. To Hamlet, life is

. . .an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature  
possess it merely. (Act I, scene 2)

Thus weakened, is it not reasonable to propose Hamlet as unable to act on his father's ghost's command?

Notwithstanding the preponderance of literature explaining, if not justifying, Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius, it is still possible to conclude that Hamlet had no reason to delay. He might, indeed, have swept to his revenge as he had promised to do. Even overcome with emotion as he was upon hearing the report of his father's murder from the dead king's ghost, some rational thought concerning the logistics of fulfilling his promise must have occurred to him when he said "Haste me to know 't that I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love/ May sweep to my revenge." He swears immediate revenge and the audience is convinced that he means it. But then, instead of sweeping to that revenge, he puts on a masquerade of having lost his wits and spends the rest of the play in self flagellation for not acting in accordance with his promise.

Perhaps the question 'Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius immediately upon hearing the ghost's story?' has never been answered satisfactorily because the question is premature. Perhaps before that question can be considered, a different question must be asked, the question 'Which Hamlet are we talking about?' There are two Hamlets: One is Hamlet, the protagonist of Shakespeare's play; the other is the historical Hamlet, the "real" Hamlet, if you will, the Amleth of Saxo Grammaticus's [\*Historica Danica\*](#), Books Three and Four, Shakespeare's source material.

Hamlet and Amleth should be very separable personages. The audience is supposed to be able to view Shakespeare's *Hamlet* without giving a thought to Amleth. Even if one has never heard of Amleth-or Saxo Grammaticus, for that matter-the play must still be comprehensible. But it isn't. Instead, the play contains an unanswered question of such monumental importance that a huge corpus of literature has been devoted to nothing but answering it-and has failed. Is there something lacking in our comprehension? Have we not done requisite historical research? Or having done our homework, have we failed to connect the history with the drama so as to make the drama comprehensible? Or has Shakespeare unsuccessfully matched Hamlet's situation with Amleth's actions, thereby creating confusion over Hamlet's actions?

Amleth's father, King Horwendil of Denmark, was murdered by his brother, Feng, who immediately thereafter turned his deadly eye on his nephew. Amleth decided to play the fool to allay suspicion in his uncle's mind, hoping that this masquerade would save his life. When the masquerade failed, Amleth fled to England. Let's consider this Amleth/Hamlet for a moment. This prince of Denmark had met no ghost, didn't need one since he, his mother, and the whole Danish court knew of the murder. He had vowed revenge, but fearing for his own life, feigned foolishness instead. This is a Hamlet with no apparent means of revenge and good reason to put on an "antic disposition" while he awaits his moment to strike his father's murderer down.

The Hamlet of Shakespeare's drama, in contrast, is secure. He is lovingly adopted by his uncle, is given full authority to act at will and is promised succession to the throne. What he learns of the nature of his father's death changes none of that. He has no reason to feel threatened until Act 4, yet he decides to masquerade as a madman at the end of Act 1. Dramatically, this is too early in the play for such a

decision. Shakespeare provides no reason for it. To the contrary, what Shakespeare provides are motivation, will and means for revenge. Feigning madness may have been a tactically correct decision for Amleth to make. His life was immediately threatened and he had to do something quickly to save himself. Shakespeare's Hamlet labors under no such threat.

Now let's consider Hamlet's play-long delay in acting out his father's ghost's command and his own promise. Shakespeare's Hamlet has even less reason for protracted delay in killing Claudius than he has to pretend madness early on. Hamlet himself tells us in Act IV, scene 4 that he has "...cause and will and strength and means To do't." Hamlet is indeed a man of action as evidenced by his killing of Polonius. Hamlet is bold: consider his singlehanded boarding of the pirate ship. And Hamlet, who is more popular than Laertes who easily raises the people against the king *to avenge the death of Polonius?!?*, might as easily raise and lead an army to avenge the murder of the former king and take the throne for himself. Yet he doesn't. Again we must ask 'Which Hamlet are we talking about?' If we are talking about Amleth, who knew from the beginning that he had been "rankly abused" and whose fellow nobles had gone along with the murder, he had no means to do anything other than act to save his own life. Shakespeare's Hamlet, on the other hand, has at his disposal forces and conditions ensuring success. If there is consistency, it is between the situation of Amleth, the historical Hamlet, and the behavior of Hamlet, Shakespeare's protagonist. If there is confusion, it is because the behavior of Shakespeare's Hamlet finds no justification in the plot of Shakespeare's play.

This is a flaw in the drama. While dramatic literature, as Aristotle tells us, imitates life (Aristotle, *Poetica*), it is not life. An author can afford the luxury of being true to history only when historical events do not interfere with the mandate that the play make sense to the audience. Hamlet's behavior makes no sense. There is no explanation for it in the drama. As members of the audience, we are not required to go outside the drama into history in order to make logical sense of the drama. Neither is the audience required to examine the structure of Shakespearean tragedy nor the characteristics of the Shakespearean tragic hero to ascertain whether or not Shakespeare's fidelity to his peculiar treatment of dramatic literature is sufficient to keep the whole drama moving conjunctively. This is not to say that having to study several of Shakespeare's plays in order to ascertain the bard's attitude toward some phenomenon in a specific play shows faulty plot construction.\* But if we must go so far outside the play as to abandon the literature altogether, then we must conclude that it is the play that is flawed, not our understanding of it.

The central question of the play is, then, a question without an answer if one is seeking the answer within the play. Shakespeare was supposed to supply us with an answer, or at least with a reason why there is no answer. He offers us neither. Instead, this most celebrated of Shakespeare's plays offers us a literary mystery which has captured the attention of all who have come into contact with it. It's time to file the question under "Unsolved Mysteries." But for those who persist in analyzing the plot of the drama, or Hamlet's psychology, or both in order to explain this particular enigma, I suggest that you're looking in the wrong place. Try history.

*Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most popular tragedy, if not his best, and one of the world's best-known plays. In addition to being a sensational story and containing some of the world's richest poetry, it showcases Shakespeare's understanding of the subtleties of human nature to a degree remarkable for his time. How else can we explain why *Hamlet* has generated such a significant number of the thousands of books and essays which form the Shakespeare industry? And how many actors of so many generations, from Richard Burbage to Edwin Booth to Laurence Olivier to Mel Gibson, have played the role? Published in 1604, it is still being read, studied and performed worldwide. *Hamlet* is the world champion of dramatic literature.