XXXV.

HAMLET’S DELAY—A RESTATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The mystery in Hamlet is a ghost that has haunted the minds of many a generation of scholars and critics. Perhaps the full secret of this mystery was to be known only by Shakespeare himself, even as that other secret was told only to Hamlet by the ghost on the platform at Elsinore.

In the dead vast and middle of the night.

Among the most notable of the many theories that have been advanced to explain the cause of Hamlet’s long delay in taking vengeance upon the King, are Goethe’s, Coleridge’s, Sir Sidney Lee’s, Professor Bradley’s, and the Klein-Werder theory. A viewing of these in the perspective which time has given, will show where they might seem to have fallen short.

Instead of saying, with Goethe, that Hamlet is “unequal to the performance” of the “great deed,” let us say rather, not unequal, but unfitted. Hamlet may lack “the strength of nerve which makes the hero,” but he is essentially courageous—we feel that he is. Does it seem true that, notwithstanding his courage, he “at last almost loses his purpose from his thoughts”? The most we can say is that the purpose becomes “almost blunted.” It is fixed deep in the mind, though it is “sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.”

Is Hamlet’s will, as Coleridge says, paralyzed by excess of intellect; or is it not, rather, turned aside by reflection? Is it quite true that Hamlet “loses the power of action in the energy of resolve”? The trouble is not, that he expends all his energy in resolving, but that, as Macbeth says,

1 In Wilhelm Meister.
2 In Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets.
3 See his Life of William Shakespeare.
4 See Shakespearean Tragedy, A. C. Bradley, 1905.
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it.

Sir Sidney Lee's explanation, that Hamlet is "foiled by introspective workings of the brain that paralyze the will," seems a little inexact: the workings are not always introspective or subjective, but are sometimes more accurately to be termed objective; for example, those which changed his purpose when the King was at prayer.

If the will were paralyzed perhaps a better theory would be Professor Bradley's, which accounts for Hamlet's irresolution thus: "The direct cause was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances—a state of profound melancholy." That Hamlet is in melancholy, even from the time of his first words, there is no denying; in two of his great soliloquies and elsewhere he is wrapped in many dark folds of it. If the melancholy were so profound, however, as it is supposed to be, it would probably involve not only stupor of will, but also clouding of intellect; whereas, though Hamlet says, "By my fay, I cannot reason," he reasons clearly—too clearly for the good of his great purpose.

Time has recognized the insight of these four kindred theories, but has found them not quite satisfying. Put forth by eminent scholars and critics, however, and harmonizing in general tone, they might well be assumed to contain a large measure of truth. Study justifies the assumption. The fuller truth would perhaps appear in a kind of composite of them. The further materials for that are to be sought in an analysis of Hamlet's nature and his career.

Hamlet is by nature earnest, high-minded, sensitive, gentle, loyal to truth and duty. He is philosophical, cultured, poetical. Though from his first appearance he is overshadowed with sorrow and humiliation, his prose poem on the grandeur of nature and of man shows that the real Hamlet, before he became pessimistic, appreciated brightness and beauty. The ghost's revelation rouses him to high passions, and yet it is little wonder that, after reflection, his whole being shrinks from the terrible deed of vengeance. Far, however, from really losing his deep purpose, ghost-given, he from the first accepts the duty, with its possibility of his having to sacrifice all that is dear to him—his love, his scholarly pursuits, and even his life, though this, he
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says, he does not set “at a pin’s fee.” Yet he cannot suddenly change his very nature; and so his habit of thinking involves him in reflection upon the bearings of the great situation. He does not clearly realize how his thoughts, even when they are of vengeance, hoodwink him and keep him from carrying out his purpose. It is not to be supposed that they keep him from this by evaporating his will and causing him to abandon all plans for doing the deed of vengeance; he probably has no definite plans except feigned madness till he is carried to them by outward events. If he had plans we should hear of them. No, the will is not evaporated, but in consciousness the stress and the attention are turned from action and put upon kindred thought. Thus, as we can see by making the fine distinction, Hamlet for the time being derives satisfaction from the shadow as if it were the substance. In truth, there is in Hamlet a little of something like rant, mingled with something that might be called sincere self-bluff; and he is all the more human and lovable. After all, though Hamlet’s thoughts do continually turn him aside, single and deep in the mind is his father’s command “unmix’d with baser matter.”

The background is now prepared for a discussion of the elaborate Klein-Werder theory, which for some years had the support of many critics. According to that theory, Hamlet was awaiting evidence that should prove to the world the King’s guilt.

If it had been lack of public proof that delayed Hamlet we should naturally have expected him in his soliloquies, or in the talks with his friend, to say so. The fact that he never did, is a presumption against the theory. Almost everything that throws light upon the cause of his delay tends to show that Hamlet was not much concerned about evidence for any mind but his own and perhaps his mother’s. Even his scheme to “catch the conscience of the king” was not a plan to get public proof, but an instance of his unconscious entertaining of reasons allied with delay; for his soliloquy, and his talk with Horatio, had indicated that he had little real doubt of the ghost’s truthfulness, and yet that he did not expect the King to confess his guilt. The prayer scene was also significant in this matter of Hamlet’s supposed concern for public proof.

For Shakespeare’s use of the soliloquy, see Professor E. E. Stoll’s “Anachronism in Shakespeare Criticism,” Modern Philology, VII, 557–575 (1910).
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We may be sure that in this scene Shakespeare had a clear purpose in presenting a good opportunity for vengeance just after Hamlet had been saying that he could drink hot blood and do any other kind of bitter business. Here is an interesting psychological situation. What will Hamlet do with his opportunity?

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;
And so am I revenged.

A man more decisive in action than Hamlet would have killed the King, not later than the words "And so am I revenged." Hamlet has an impulse to act in the same way, but an incongruity of ideas inhibits action. As usual with him, "that would be scann'd"; and in scanning it he turns from willing to thinking. His impulse subsides; and about the words "My mother stays," in the rime at the close of the soliloquy, seems to play a subtle, elusive connotation that the delay which offers itself is a kind of unconscious relief.

One critic, interpreting the Klein-Werder theory, says of Hamlet here, "The prince dares not kill him—not for any subjective reasons, but for such as are purely objective."7 Hamlet, on the contrary, has said, "And now I'll do't." He does not do it, but he dares do it; and the grim reason which he gives for changing his mind is not a civic reason. If he had spared the King's life on grounds of prudence he would scarcely so soon have forgotten his caution as to strike through the arras a few minutes later at some one who he evidently thought was the King. "I took thee for thy better." It was easier for him to attempt the dreaded deed when the victim was not present to his eyes; for he was partly right in self-knowledge when he had said, the day before the play,

.... it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal.

Only the day before the test of his play, then, and just after he has planned it, we find strong indication that Hamlet has not been delaying because of his lack of public proof.

7 William J. Rolfe, p. 335 of his revised edition of Hamlet.
On the question whether Hamlet was thus delaying, what is the testimony of the ghost? "It is an honest ghost," speaking with authority. The objection will perhaps be made that, on the theme of vengeance to be, this spirit was interested not in the means, but only in the fact. Even if that doubtful supposition be true, the ghost nevertheless goes to the heart of the matter when it says,

Do not forget: this visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose
—almost blunted in the sense of being turned aside into thought, and thus retarded. As Hamlet said, on another occasion, we may "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound."

In further testimony, one of the most illuminating passages is the soliloquy in IV.4.32–66. In these lines Hamlet glorifies the use of reasoning, which, however, in the way that he has been using it is an enemy to his great purpose. Part of the passage follows:

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward, 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.8

Here Hamlet admires man's "large discourse," and seems to apply it, consciously or unconsciously, to his own case. As he can partly see, one thing that keeps him from his vengeance is a kind of scruple, not, though, exactly craven,

Of thinking too precisely on the event [issue, result].

For instance, he reasons on the event in the prayer scene and in the soliloquy in which he imagines that the ghost may be

8 Here, and elsewhere, see the text of the edition by Gollancz.
deceiving him. Possibly we may infer that he frequently thus reasons, on the issue, in soliloquies that Shakespeare does not present. That god-like reason which he admires, and which he can use, he ranks far above this kind of thinking which he calls craven. Speaking of a player's worked-up passion and eloquence, he has said,

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, un pregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing.

Far from saying nothing, he is always saying too much; he continually unpacks his heart with words. Indeed, his "commerce" with words is at once the outcome and the evidence of his disposition to think rather than to act. Hamlet's contrasting his thought and its scruples with Fortinbras's admirable decisive enterprise, which

Makes mouths at the invisible event,

implies that Hamlet considers it his duty to sweep to his revenge, unrestrained by lack of public proof or by anything else. Proof to his own mind he has long had, and for any other kind he has never much cared. No, his trouble consists in thinking too much, and in "thinking too precisely on the event,"—a use of reasoning that he would hardly call "three parts coward" and "but one part wisdom" if he were much concerned about public proof.

Another significant passage (part of which does not appear in the quartos, but is supplied by the First Folio) is Hamlet's confidential talk with Horatio in V. 2. 64–74:

Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
Popp'd in between the 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 damm'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

What does Horatio answer or advise? Does he urge Hamlet to forbear, when the cause for seeking vengeance is now twofold? No, he answers acquiescently or evasively,
It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.

Hamlet resumes,
It will be short: the interim is mine.

His words above and here connote that a delicate conscience has
been partly the restraint, but that now he ought to take ven-
geance, and that he had better take it soon. This he intends to
do; carried to decision, however, by the current of events that
has suddenly set forward from his mistaken killing of Polonius
and from the King's plot. None can tell—if events had not soon
borne him onward to final action he might again have thought
his decision away.

In checkmating the King's plot Hamlet had shown ability to
devise cunningly and act tellingly. An adherent of the Klein-
Werder theory might say that Hamlet had easily possessed this
ability all the while, and that his not using it before had indi-
cated disinclination to act without public proof. In the first
place, almost any intelligent man "be-netted round with
villanies" as Hamlet was, and thus put upon his own resources
of self-defense, might show unusual decisiveness and invention.
Again, if Hamlet was awaiting objective evidence is it not
more than strange that he at no time said so? Leaving some
half-dozen soliloquies entirely out of the account, for the
moment, one remembers at least two occasions on which Hamlet
would have been likely to mention in his talks with Horatio
any quest of public proof, or deplore the known lack of it.

In short, the cast of Hamlet's character, the testimony of the
ghost, the words of Hamlet himself, and the whole tone of the
play are against the Klein-Werder theory. Time is showing it
to be untenable.

A new theory, put forth a few years ago, is advocated by the
Shakespeare skeptics, exponents of historical criticism. Influ-
enced, perhaps, by Matthew Arnold's opinion that Shake-
spere is "not altogether, nor even eminently, an artist,"

9 For a clear and able presentation of the theory, see Professor Karl Young's
article, "The Shakespeare Skeptics," North American Review, March, 1922,
382-393. Cf. also Professor E. E. Stoll's elaborate discussion, "Hamlet; an
Historical and Comparative Study," Research Publications of the University of
Minnesota, VIII, No. 5, 1919.

10 Expressed in the essay or article "A Guide to English Literature" (review
of Stopford A. Brooke's Primer of English Literature).
these critics, though they recognize his creative power, do not grant the presence of artistic harmony between character and action. They hold that Shakespeare probably used the plot of a play by Thomas Kyd, but developed the personality of Hamlet beyond the scope of the old intrigue. Using other terms, they would say that the hero is plot-ridden, not all his actions being in character; that Shakespeare could not fit Hamlet, one of his most complex creations, into the simple plot of the old play and avoid inconsistency. Time is the surest critic; and accordingly, though this theory seems to be growing in favor, it does not yet take rank as work which, in Lowell's phrase, "Time has criticised for us."

It is hoped that this present delving into a deep subject may "hold up Adam's profession;" that it may help, at least in a humble way, to continue the Hamlet traditions, which have set countless other minds to digging in the rich field of literary interpretation. So may these present results be of some worth or suggestiveness till they are superseded by the more valuable findings of some deeper "goodman delver."

These results may be summarized in a few sentences: Hamlet himself is the explanation of Hamlet. He is called to do a deed of terrible vengeance from which, after passion cools, his whole nature, experience, and taste almost instinctively recoil. Yet he accepts the duty bravely, to the possible giving up of love, life, everything in this world. In one of the last scenes Hamlet, looking at death as the giving up of life, or the leaving of it, touchingly says, "The readiness is all." To assign in Hamlet's career prudential, worldly-wise motives of public proof is to miss appreciation of his noble character. That teaches us, far more truly than any supposed considerations that are practical, the cause of his delay: Hamlet is held in the leash of his own nature; his will to do is not taken away, but turned aside by his power to think.

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