Hamlet, the Pseudo-Procrastinator

ROBERT R. REED, JR.

In view of the countless "solutions" to the paradox of Hamlet's conduct, the reader may understandably suspect me of crass boldness in adding a further comment. I take heart, however, from my conviction that even the most thoughtful of recent criticisms have not departed completely from the nineteenth-century tradition which condones expedient evasions of one or more of the major facts. My purpose is to correlate these facts into an intelligible pattern of conduct. Neither the external problems that render close to impossible Hamlet's execution of vengeance upon Claudius nor the prince's bitter self-accusations blaming the delay wholly upon himself need be side-stepped or minimized; but the evasion or, at best, the distortion of one or the other has traditionally been the custom of the critics, since from the viewpoint of logic the two phenomena are strikingly incompatible. Dr. Ernest Jones, employing a tenet of modern psychoanalysis, goes so far as to argue that Hamlet procrastinates because of an Oedipus complex. Indeed, from the time of Goethe, the majority of critics have ascribed Hamlet's delay in avenging his murdered father to a weakness of character. But those more familiar with Elizabethan traditions have insisted that the delay is motivated by manifest external obstacles; they have stressed two main difficulties: Hamlet's orthodox doubt as to the veracity of the Ghost and, second, the complications of executing vengeance upon a heavily guarded monarch, against whom there is no tangible evidence of his crime. With the latter critics I concur in full, except for one thing—their custom of side-stepping or, at best, awkwardly explaining Hamlet's self-accusations of delay. The psychotic factors, I agree, are in no way responsible for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father; on the contrary, a not uncommon neurosis results from Hamlet's enforced inactivity and is the cause of his self-reriminations, which, in view of the external obstacles to vengeance, are clearly unwarranted. Yet, as I shall hope to prove, they are perfectly intelligible—in fact, so intelligible that Hamlet's conduct would appear obtuse and unnatural without them.

The two traditional schools of thought concerning the character of Hamlet are both unsound for the reason that each bases its interpretation on only a part of the important facts. The school that adheres to the principle that Hamlet's delay is internally motivated may be divided into three groups: the critics led by Goethe with his theory that Hamlet is weak-willed; those led by Schlegel and Coleridge, who maintained that the habit of meditation paralyzes the capacity for action; and those who have followed Hermann Ulrici's doctrine that Christian ethics, or moral scruples, are a deterrent to blood revenge. Whatever their basic differences of opinion, these critics have pursued a similar method of argu-
ment: they have ignored or minimized the external obstacles to vengeance and, citing those passages in which Hamlet upbraids himself for procrastinating, have concluded that the prince is by nature incapable of executing a ruthless deed. The opposing critics, following the lead of the Germans J. L. Klein and Karl Werder, have correctly pointed out the external obstacles to Hamlet's motive of revenge, but are embarrassed by his self-accusations of delay, and—Werder in part excepted—explain them oddly or ignore them. A third, more modern group, including Ernest Jones and Oscar J. Campbell, has attempted to compromise these viewpoints; these men recognize Hamlet as a youth capable of decisive action, but ascribe his failure in the particular motive of revenge to psychotic shortcomings. Professor Campbell's theory (Yale Review, December 1942) has aroused the fewest objections. He regards Hamlet as a manic-depressive, who vacillates between violent action and brooding inaction: "Adverse fate so times the rhythm of Hamlet's malady that at any given moment he is in the grip of the emotions which fit him least to deal with the situation confronting him."1 One objection to Campbell's theory is that, in explaining Hamlet's failure to act at the proper moment, it depends too strongly on coincidence—as Campbell suggests, on "adverse fate". More important, although it recognizes that Hamlet is at times a man of action, it fails to consider in full the external obstacles confronting the motive of vengeance, a consideration which a complete account of the facts cannot evade.

Ernest Jones's argument that Hamlet suffers an Oedipus complex is the most ingenious attempt to solve the Hamlet problem. Like the arguments of his predecessors who have insisted that Hamlet's delay in exacting vengeance is internally motivated, it adequately explains those speeches, three in number, in which the prince reproaches himself for procrastination; but it also recognizes Hamlet as a man of action—a fact that the adherents of the "paralysis of doubt" theory have been obliged to overlook—and concludes that only in the matter of revenge is the prince incapable of action. This is explained by the fact that Hamlet, having inadequately repressed a desire to possess his mother, identifies himself with his intended victim, now espoused to his mother, and thus cannot, in clear conscience, bring himself to act against him. To accept the principle that an Oedipus complex deters Hamlet in his motive, we are asked to give credence to two hypotheses: first, that Shakespeare (who knew nothing of Freudian psychology) suffered from a marked Oedipus complex and, thus, depicted Hamlet in his own likeness as powerless to act against a man who had done away with his father and married his mother; second, that Hamlet's delay in the motive of vengeance cannot be adequately explained by external obstacles. The first hypothesis neither can nor need be refuted; Dr. Jones has convinced himself and a sizable minority of his readers that Shakespeare was the victim of an Oedipus complex in spite of the fact that Jones and his professional confrères are the first to emphasize the months of laborious probing and examination essential to the psychoanalysis of a patient. Shakespeare's "Oedipus complex" must, I think, remain a dubious hypothesis from now until Doomsday. The second hypothesis is simply a contradiction of the truth. Along with other critics, John Ashworth (Atlantic Monthly, April 1949) has emphati-

1 Oscar J. Campbell, "What's the Matter with Hamlet", Yale Review (December 1942) XXXII (2), 313.
cally pointed out that we cannot expect an avenger to strike down his royal victim in full sight of a gathering of courtiers and bodyguards, by whom he is customarily attended. Such actions may result from desperation or mania, but not from calculated vengeance. Jones argues that the prince has an excellent opportunity to kill his uncle at the close of the play-within-the-play and points to only one reason for his failure to do so: namely, his so-called “Oedipus complex”. But, one unavoidably asks, what would have been the outcome of such a public attempt at vengeance? Whether he succeeded or failed, Hamlet would almost assuredly have lost his own life. Even more distressing to a man of cherished honor, he—and not Claudius—would have been recorded by history as the blackguard; the reason for this is evident, even to the blind: of the large and influential assemblage of persons who are present, only Hamlet and indirectly Horatio have knowledge that Claudius is a murderer. To the others, the King’s implied confession of guilt is meaningless. One marvels at the assumption—made by so intelligent a man as Dr. Jones—that the testimony of a ghost, delivered in absentia, is sufficient evidence to convict a king of fratricide.

Moreover, unlike many of my predecessors, some of them clearly ignorant of Elizabethan traditions, I cannot dismiss Hamlet’s expressed doubts as to the veracity of the Ghost as mere talk and babble. The Protestant and consequently the Elizabethan belief, in contrast to the Roman Catholic creed, was that the souls of the dead went directly to Heaven or Hell, not to Purgatory, and could not return to this world. The Swiss Protestant Ludwig Lavater in De Spectris (1570) and King James I in Daemonologie (1597) upheld this viewpoint, maintaining that the Devil could assume either the shape or the dead body of a newly deceased person and thus give the illusion of a ghost; but the reality of ghosts was positively denied by both men. James argued that an intelligent Christian knows that “neither can the spirite of the defunct return to his friend, or yet an Angel use such formes.”² Lavater, citing Tertullian as his authority, wrote: “Evil spirits do use this kind of deceit, to fayne themselves to be soules of such as are deceassed.”³ This attitude, both Protestant and Elizabethan, is expressed not only by Horatio and Marcellus but also by Hamlet as they gaze upon the apparition of the dead king. Horatio fears that it “may assume some other horrible form”; Marcellus, like Horatio, begs Hamlet not to follow it; and Hamlet supposes that it may be “a goblin damned”. Nevertheless, he is undecided because of its “questionable shape” and consequently agrees to “call [it] Hamlet, / King, father”. When alone with the Ghost, Hamlet has neither the will nor the rational power nor the courage to doubt its authenticity; for the moment, “the pales and forts of reason” are inundated completely under emotional predilection. Later, in a mood governed by reason rather than emotion, Hamlet expresses serious doubt concerning the authenticity of the Ghost: “The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil [who] ... / Abuses me to damn me” (II. ii). It seems odd, of course, that he should not announce this renewed

doubt as to the Ghost until after he has arranged with the itinerant actors the play-within-the-play, the intent of which is to elicit some sort of confession from Claudius and thus prove, or disprove, the reliability of the Ghost. But only one day after this doubt is expressed, Hamlet makes it apparent that he had discussed his misgivings about the Ghost with Horatio at a time precedent to the Players' coming to Elsinore; careful to inform his friend that a play will shortly be staged "before the king", he explains:

One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death

If his [Claudius'] occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy [forge]. (III. ii)

How long Hamlet has entertained a renewed doubt concerning the Ghost's identity, we are not told by the text of the play. It is, however, logical to believe that as soon as the emotional stimuli of coming face to face with the Ghost had worn off, the Protestant attitude, which denied the reality of ghosts, began to re-assert itself in Hamlet's mind. There can, furthermore, be little doubt that Hamlet's misgivings about the veracity of the Ghost are honest ones and not a "cogent" excuse, as Jones has insisted, for his failure to carry out promptly his motive of vengeance. Upon the very first opportunity of determining whether his informant is an honest ghost or a deceitful devil intent on his damnation, Hamlet acts with remarkable despatch and precision: only a single day elapses between his meeting with the Players and the performance of the play-scene; moreover, the speech which he has prepared to be inserted in the "Murder of Gonzago" is so deadly in its pointedness that the first six of its "dozen or sixteen" lines are sufficient to bring a tacit confession from Claudius. Thus, having fashioned an unexpected opportunity to his own purposes, Hamlet removes the paramount obstacle to his motive of vengeance, and consequently his most cogent reason not to slay Claudius, without an iota of evasion.

Once the uncertainty about the Ghost's identity has been removed—once Claudius, witnessing the satanic murder featured in the play-within-the-play, has cried, "Give me some light: away!"—Hamlet finds the King alone at prayer. Again, we must not forget the viewpoint of the Elizabethan; to him, repentance of past sins, however heinous, was tantamount to the soul's salvation. To do away with Claudius while he is in the act of repentance would have

4 Time and again Elizabethan writers attest to the absolute power of repentance to assure salvation. Two examples may be taken from Ulpius Fulweli's morality-interlude Like Will to Like (1568), printed in Old English Plays, ed. Robert Dodsley, 4th edition (London, 1874), vol. III. Virtuous Living, in an attempt to redeem the souls of several sinners, paraphrases a promise of Jesus:

Come unto me, ye that . . .

with sin are heavily laden: . . .

Repent, repent, your sins shall be downtrodden. (P. 341)

Pierce Pickpocket, on the way to the gallows, hopes for salvation: "At the last to God let us call; / For he heareth such as are ready to repent. / And desireth not that sinners should fall" (p. 354).

Wm. Perkins in A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft (written shortly before 1602) observes of witches, whom he considered more criminal than murderers: "If they repent, then God pardoneth their sin" (P. 253).
been, as Hamlet says, mere "hire and salary, not revenge." His father had been slain, to quote the Ghost, "with all my imperfections on my head: O horrible! O horrible! most horrible!" In Fletcher's The Pilgrim, revenge is put aside for the reason that the intended victim, a man who prays hourly, is too well prepared for Heaven. To the extent that the Elizabethan accepted the fact that King Hamlet (slain without benefit of repentance) was "confin'd to fast in fires", he was bound to understand that the prince could not slay Claudius "in the purging of his soul" without, in all likelihood, securing the salvation of his victim.

It is manifest, I think, that Hamlet was thwarted in the motive of vengeance by external obstacles. But the critics who have promulgated this theory have, with unfailing regularity, weakly interpreted or side-stepped his self-accusations of delay, the very passages on which the opposing school has built its thesis that the delay was internally motivated. In consequence, even the best criticisms of Hamlet's conduct have been unduly one-sided. Before I turn to an explanation of Hamlet's "admissions" of delay—his pseudo-procrastination—I wish to add one thought in support of the evidence that Hamlet's obstacles were external. In the saga of Amleth, as recorded by Saxo Grammaticus, the hero awaits, as he informs his mother, the "fitting hour" to avenge his slain father against Feng. This principle of the avenger's biding his time, of awaiting the appropriate opportunity, was later to be the almost invariable technique of Elizabethan tragedy. Hamlet as an avenger was the product of this and no other tradition. He is confronted by the normal number of external problems; what distinguishes him from his fellow avengers of the stage is his hypersensitive response to the delay imposed by these obstacles.

We come now to the apparent paradox of Hamlet's self-accusations of delay, which are clearly unwarranted. This paradox can in part be clarified by Elizabethan tenets that explain the functions of conscience and especially its morbid preoccupation with past sins and omissions. But, in so far as Shakespeare's insight into character went far beyond the scope of Elizabethan psychology, a more complete explanation of Hamlet's conduct must depend upon a modernization of these concepts. In the respect that the present-day concepts which best explain Hamlet's paradoxical conduct are basically identical to the Elizabethan tenets available to Shakespeare, they have a validity that is not shared by the Oedipus complex theory.

Tenets of Elizabethan psychology fully support the hypothesis that Hamlet's unwarranted self-reproaches are the outgrowth of a conscience that is preoccupied with some past sin or omission; but they do not contain an adequate explanation of the psychic origins of his guilt complex, a task that must depend on the help of those modern principles which explain the relation of the super-ego, or the conscience, to abnormal behavior. The Elizabethan physician Timothy Bright in his once-famous Treatise of Melancholie (1586) recognized "a molestation [that] riseth from conscience, condemning the guilty soul of those ingraven laws of nature, which no man is voide of. . . . Neither is the guiltiness brought to us by foreine report, but the knowledge riseth from the conscience of the offender" (p. 196). Thirty-five years later, Robert Burton, restating the established Elizabethan causes of melancholy, wrote: "The last and
The greatest cause of this malady is our conscience. . . . Our conscience . . . grinds our souls with remembrance of some precedent sins, makes us reflect upon, accuse and condemn our own selves. . . . This scrupulous conscience . . . tortures so many, [who] . . . accuse themselves and aggravate every small offence."6 In fine, Bright and Burton have told us that a disquieting sense of guilt arises from the dictates of conscience when they are violated; second, that victims of conscience deal in self-accusations and, as Burton states, "out of a deep apprehension of their unworthiness . . . aggravate" every trivial sin or personal failure. That Shakespeare was keenly aware of the distempers that a violated conscience could evoke is frequently evident in his plays; Richard III, after the dream in which the ghosts of his victims appear, cries:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.7

The principles of Bright and Burton provide us with a broad formula outlining Hamlet's abnormal tendency to abase himself. His over-developed conscience is violated by something that he has done or, equally possible, by something that he has failed to do, which is—as is clear from the context of the play—his failure to avenge his father; in consequence, informed by his conscience of his "guiltiness", he falls into excessive and, in his case, unwarranted self-accusations.

A second important aspect that I believe underlies Hamlet's conduct is hinted at, but not clarified, by Elizabethan mental science. To counteract melancholy imposed by conscience, Burton advised "repentance", which he termed "a remedy . . . of our miseries" (p. 953). Burton meant "repentance to God"; but this does not preclude the probability that Shakespeare considered self-rebuke, certainly a major aspect of repentance, to be a potent means of inactivating the "molestation" which, as Bright maintained, "riseth from conscience".

The modern theory which recognizes the neurotic's "need to suffer"—a need that includes self-accusation and abasement—is not explicitly supported by Elizabethan mental science, which can explain Hamlet's tendency to indulge in self-accusations, but affords no sharply defined theory as to his need for doing so. Moreover, Elizabethan tenets cannot accurately define the psychic composition of the dictate, or "molestation", that stems from Hamlet's conscience and forces him into self-accusations which are clearly unwarranted. Indeed, until these two matters are clarified by modern psychology, a reader may have reasonable doubt that the basic source of Hamlet's mental tension is his conscience and not a habitual psychosis. All critics are agreed that Shakespeare's intuitive understanding explored depths of human nature far beyond the scope of Elizabethan principles of psychology. We are justified, consequently, in turning to modern tenets dealing with the conscience for a more complete understanding of Hamlet's conduct, especially of those aspects which are inadequately explained by Elizabethan science. The present-day theory of the structure and function of the

superego, or the conscience, differs from the earlier viewpoint in only one basic
tenet: it insists that the dictates of conscience are implanted by the severity of
our infantile moral training, whereas the Elizabethans believed that they
stemmed directly from God. But this difference is not an irreconcilable one: the
moral training that an infant receives from his parents and teachers may be
interpreted as having its source in a higher law of nature. Shakespeare was
aware of such an inseparable relationship; for one example, when Claudius
reprimands Hamlet for his “unmanly grief”, he immediately adds:

It shows a will most incorrect to heaven . . .
An understanding simple and unschooled.

Shakespeare, in equating Hamlet’s shortcoming to an affront against heaven,
immediately blames the fault on a neglect in Hamlet’s training; his manifest
belief was that the laws of “heaven”, or God, are made known primarily
through the inculcation of moral discipline.

Two facts are clear: for external reasons Hamlet is unable to carry out his
motive of vengeance; on the other hand, he violently upbraids himself for not
doing so. So far, in relying on Elizabethan principles of conscience, I have made
only a tenuous explanation of this enigma. The psychic origin and the ultimate
structure of the dictate that tyrannizes over Hamlet’s mind are not yet clear,
nor has it been adequately shown why a conscience-stricken person has need to
resort to self-accusation. Freud has argued that the superego, or conscience, takes
its beginning from a threat of castration essential to suppress the infantile
Oedipus complex. But this hypothesis, right or wrong, is hardly material to the
actual existence of the superego, which, as psychoanalysts and many psycholo-
gists agree, is comprised of dictates acquired through moral discipline in child-
hood and, remaining thereafter “wholly or very largely unconscious”,8 has the
duty of censorship over the conscious mind. Freud points out that the earliest
and strongest of these dictates evolve from the child’s relation with his parents,
both from self-identification with them and their ideals and from their precepts;
he also recognizes that a principal dictate acquired in childhood is that of filial
obedience, which is expressed in a high regard by the child for his parents and
without which the inculcation of further discipline would be all but impossible.
Furthermore, the stronger has been a child’s moral discipline, the more tyran-
nical, according to Freud, tend to be the dictates of the superego, which, in his
interpretation, “the ego [consciousness] forms . . . out of the id”.9 That Hamlet,
a prince and only child, has been subjected to the strictest kind of discipline,
especially in regard for his parents, is not merely a logical hypothesis; it is a
truth manifest throughout the play. His filial obedience is hinted at in his atti-
dute toward his mother at the outset: “I shall in all my best obey you, madam.”
But far stronger are Hamlet’s devotion and feeling of duty toward his dead
father. This attitude, even before the Ghost has appeared to him, underscores
his first soliloquy: “So excellent a king; that was, to this, / Hyperion to a satyr.”
When seconds later—having severely censured the queen’s hasty remarriage—he
sobs, “But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue”, he is not stifling a

Freud states that the superego is formed out of the ego, but becomes a part of the “internal world”.

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jealousy for his mother and her "incestuous sheets", as the adherents of the Oedipus complex theory have insisted. On the contrary, so strong has been his moral training, so strong at present are the dictates of his offended conscience, that he is horrified at her infidelity to his father; his despair is made complete, and he is stunned into silence, by the knowledge that his words and actions are powerless to atone for his mother's immense sacrilege, which, as he describes it, "cannot come to good." His accustomed esteem for his mother—and with it much of his moral outlook on life—has crashed about him, in irreparable fragments.

Shortly, Hamlet learns from the Ghost that his paramount responsibility is to avenge his father's murder. In a passion of filial obedience, he vows to "sweep to . . . revenge" on "wings as swift as meditation"; later, just after the Ghost has departed, he pledges: "Thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain." Once his conscious mind has reasserted itself, Hamlet is fully aware that he is confronted by hazardous external obstacles, and hence plans to put on "an antic disposition" in order to conceal his motive. But his conscience, the "precipitate" of childhood years of strictest moral discipline, is not able to take account of such practical matters. Since it had been activated, while his reason was largely suppressed, during the encounter with the Ghost—a matter confirmed by his unqualified expressions of filial duty at that time—it has dedicated itself to an immediate course of vengeance which, although consistent with Hamlet's deep sense of loyalty, is independent of the commitments later resolved upon by his rational mind. That part of it, moreover, which is unconscious—according to modern theory, an overwhelmingly major portion—is completely isolated from the faculty of reason and has not the power even to comprehend Hamlet's rationally developed doubt as to the veracity of the Ghost. Hamlet's self is divided by two injunctions, one resulting from the precautions of reason, the other from the unconscious and insistent dictates of the superego. Consider, for example, the soliloquy ending Act II: it is sharply contradictory in substance for the reason that Hamlet's mind is at first engaged in response to the dictates of his conscience. This response, confirming the superego's unqualified acceptance of the duty imposed by the Ghost, takes the form of violent self-accusations for his failure to have avenged his father; then, with an obvious effort, he cries, "Fie upon 't, foh! About, my brain", and turns his mind to the world of reality and the practical consideration with which he is faced: the fact that the Ghost may be the Devil, and that therefore he has arranged the play-within-the-play, hopeful of proving to himself his right to slay Claudius. The phrase, "About, my brain", is clear indication of Hamlet's realization that he is confronted by two diametrically opposite criteria of values, the one unreasonable

10 As A. C. Bradley (Shakespearean Tragedy, 1905) has pointed out, the morally sensitive Hamlet suffers a state of shock as the result of his mother's hasty remarriage. But I cannot agree with Bradley that this condition of shock persists throughout four acts of the play and that it is the reason which prevents Hamlet from promptly executing the motive of vengeance. (The motive of vengeance, in actuality, appears to lift Hamlet out of his state of shock by giving him a renewed purpose in life.) Bradley argues that Hamlet frequently emerges from the grip of stupefaction in order to greet old friends or the players, to marvel at his failure to kill the King, or to carry out the ruthless scheme which sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. Therefore, the question arises as to why Hamlet, in one of his less oppressed moods, cannot find time to slay the King if, as Bradley feels, the task in itself is not a particularly difficult one.
in its demands and quite mystifying, the other realistic and understandable, and each completely isolated from the other.

Both the compelling nature of Hamlet's inner conscience and the fact that it has no information of the external obstacles that have deterred the motive of vengeance are irrefutably testified by the final appearance of Hamlet senior's ghost. Unseen and unheard by his mother, who is present, it speaks to him from the realm of the inner mind: "This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose." The embodiment of Hamlet's conscience is ultimate proof of what has been tormenting him from the time of his first encounter with the Ghost—then a ghost of revenge—when he was intrusted with its "dread command". The longer Hamlet must delay in carrying out his pledge—first, for absolute proof of Claudius's guilt, later for the "fitting hour"—the more forcible are the demands of the superego that its dictate of prompt vengeance in obedience to his father be fulfilled. "The tension", wrote Freud (p. 49), "between the demands of the conscience and the actual attainments of the ego [whether misdeeds or 'unexecuted intentions'] is experienced as a sense of guilt", which, as he stresses elsewhere, is "contributed by a superego that has grown peculiarly severe and cruel". It is inevitable, therefore, that Hamlet, whose conscience is unable to comprehend the problems imposed on him by the real world, falls victim to a marked guilt complex. Freud and other psychoanalysts have pointed out that only through abasement and self-injury can the neurotic's sense of guilt (described by them as basically unconscious) be relieved: "Self-torments of melancholics . . . are without doubt pleasurable." Dr. Martin W. Peck is more explicit: The neurotic finds "relief from guilt by abasement and self-punishment"—and, as he later states, "by self-deprecation". As Hamlet's guilt complex becomes unbearably strong, he relies instinctively on the only available remedy—abasement and self-torment. By undeservedly reproaching himself for weakness of character, in particular by transposing the causes that obstruct his vengeance from external obstacles to himself, Hamlet can temporarily assuage the painful sense of guilt and gain relief from it. He undergoes what Dr. A. A. Brill has termed an "emotional catharsis" that follows the fulfillment of the "need for punishment". His self-reproaches for not having avenged his father suggest that he becomes at times conscious of the precise nature of the superego's dictate; according to Freud and Brill, an awareness of this sort, though not found in most neurotic disorders, is not uncommon among melancholics: "In melancholia, the ego humbly submits to the criticism and tyrannical oppression of the superego and admits its guilt." Hamlet's other methods of abasement—for example, his ludicrous appearance in "doublet all unbrac'd" before Ophelia—are less directly related to the demands of the conscience; but, like his self-accusations, they are means of satisfying a need for punishment and attest to a potent sense of guilt.

14 Brill, Freud's Contribution to Psychiatry (New York, 1944), p. 153. Freud and Brill recognize two types of melancholia: manic-depressive psychosis and narcissistic (or "involution") melancholia. Oppressed by the strong dictates of conscience, Hamlet suffers from the first and milder of these two types.
Hamlet's procrastination, consequently, is apparent, not real. Since circumstances—prior to his ruthless betrayal of the King's henchmen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—have rendered impossible the performance of a well-planned act of aggression against his father's murderer, he is forced to rely on self-incrimination to calm the storms of the superego, which, lying largely in the unconscious mind, is unable to evaluate the external problems and hence imposes an unreasonable dictate upon the ego, or consciousness. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Hamlet's most tempestuous self-accusation, climaxed by "Or ere this / I should have fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal" (II. ii), precedes his outburst against his mother, which is an indirect aggression against Claudius. During and after the scene with his mother, he again reproaches himself for the failure to avenge his father, but less tempestuously: the demands of the superego, having found partial satisfaction in Hamlet's aggressive conduct, are now less strong and, therefore, less a threat to his sanity.

My purpose in this essay has not been to establish a new interpretation of Hamlet's character. I accept the thesis, first emphatically stated by Werder, that Hamlet is a man of action and that he is deterred in his motive of vengeance solely by the external obstacles, among which is the orthodox doubt as to the identity of the Ghost. My purpose has been to explain only the reasons behind Hamlet's self-accusations of delay. These self-reproaches are undoubtedly the factor chiefly responsible for the school which insists that Hamlet's failure in the revenge motive is the result of an innate weakness; on the other hand, the upholders of what has been termed the "external difficulty" theory have been compelled to ignore or to explain them awkwardly. The result, in almost every instance, has been a marked disproportion of criticism. In view of the apparent incompatibility between Hamlet's self-accusations of delay and the manifest external obstacles to his motive of vengeance, evasions or distortions of one or more of the major facts relating to his conduct have been inevitable. As I see it, only the tenets of "conscience"—those of the Elizabethans abetted by those of modern times—can adequately resolve this particular problem. Moreover, these tenets, although they stamp Hamlet as a neurotic, do not contravene the theory that he is a man capable of ruthless action. His failure to execute prompt vengeance upon Claudius does not stem from his neurosis; on the contrary, his neurosis—a potent but temporary guilt complex—is the effect of the inaction which is prolonged by the external problems, and for which he is brought to task by the predetermined and altogether illogical dictates of his conscience.

Pennsylvania State University