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# Is Hamlet a Weak Character?

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IS HAMLET A WEAK CHARACTER?

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the requirements for the degree of Mas-  
ter of Arts in Loyola University

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### Vita Auctoris

David Ignatius Condon was born in Chicago, Illinois, October 16, 1908. He received his elementary education at St. Joseph and Holy Family Schools, and attended St. Ignatius High School, Chicago, from which he was graduated in June, 1926. In September of the same year he was enrolled in the College of Arts and Science of Loyola University, Chicago, where he remained for two years. In September, 1928, he entered the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio. Four years later he transferred to St. Louis University, where he received his A. B. degree in June, 1933. In the same month he entered the Graduate School of the same University, and the following year transferred to West Baden College and Loyola University. He has taught at St. Ignatius High School, Cleveland, Ohio, and the University of Detroit High School, Detroit, Michigan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction . . . . .	1
II. Hamlet and the Requirements for a Tragic Hero .	7
III. The Subjective School of Critics . . . . .	13
IV. The Objective School of Critics . . . . .	33
V. Conclusion . . . . .	55
VI. Bibliography . . . . .	72

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, is one which has intrigued the minds of men since it first appeared sometime during the twelfth century from the pen of Saxo Grammaticus, and more especially since Shakespeare took the account and remade it into a deep and fascinating story of the mysteries of human life. Hamlet's mystery seems to be a fundamental riddle of life and one which has challenged the minds of many thinking men in one shape or another. The underlying principles of the mystery of Hamlet can be seen from time to time in certain characters we meet, both in fiction and in real life. The circumstances that surround each particular case may be somewhat different, but the fundamental problem is the same as Hamlet's. That is certainly one reason why the story has such a universal appeal and why it still continues to be told and retold in various shapes and forms.

Hudson says:

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 character 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; and that the less one sees into him, the more apt one is to think that he sees through him; in which respect indeed he is like nature herself. (1)

But the problem of Hamlet is a riddle which has never been solved with any amount of universal satisfaction. Many and varied have been the

answers which have been proposed by critics, not only in our own tongue but in many of the principal languages of the continent of Europe. Some of the solutions which have been offered are puerile and absurd; others, which at first sight seem convincing and satisfactory, are found to be at variance with the facts of the story; and there are still others which are founded directly on the story and are convincing enough, but some of these seem to be diametrically opposed, one to the other.

The story of Hamlet is briefly told. Hamlet, the only son of the once reigning King of Denmark, is called home from school for the funeral of his father, who had died a very mysterious death. He returns in time to be present at the wedding of his mother and his father's brother, who is now the King. The quick succession of these two events throws Hamlet into a fit of unshakable melancholy. Hamlet is then visited by the ghost of his murdered father, and by him is told all the details of his gruesome death. Hamlet's paternal uncle is the secret murderer, who after the deed married the Queen, Hamlet's mother, and usurped the throne. The ghost places on Hamlet the obligation of revenging his death, but warns him neither to taint his mind nor to harm the Queen in any way. Hamlet promises and the ghost disappears. Now Hamlet is puzzled. How is he to revenge his father's death without staining his own conscience? Delay follows upon delay and Hamlet continually puts off the deed, until the final catastrophe engulfs all concerned in one vast scene of carnage and blood.

The point of the story about which we shall be concerned is whether or not Hamlet was a weak character. But in attempting to solve

this question we come upon another problem that requires a solution before we can solve the first question. This new difficulty is very knotty, and one that has given rise to much wordy discussion by critics. The difficulty can be stated, "Why did not Hamlet act?" Therefore, if we are to solve the first question, we must necessarily solve the second.

It would be sheer folly to attempt to solve so perplexing a problem as the above, unless we followed a definite system. First of all, then, we shall have to explain this last question first, that is, "Why did not Hamlet act?" But on examination we find that criticism, mountain high, has accumulated in an effort to explain it. All the opinions given on this difficult question can be divided into two major units, or schools of thought. We shall examine these opinions, study them, and then accept or reject them in whole or in part.

In the choice of these opinions we have been guided not so much by the recentness of the opinion, but more by its present-day appeal and wide acceptance. Many opinions about Hamlet have appeared since some of the critics whom we shall study in this thesis wrote theirs, but in nearly every case these opinions are traceable in whole or in part to the theories of these critics. We have tried to include all the important theories of the representative critics of the various schools of thought, and in so doing have anticipated the theories that are at present being proposed. For any new theory on Hamlet will have as its foundations one of these concepts which we intend to study, and if we can prove that these fundamental concepts are not acceptable we shall also have proved that the theories which follow

from them will be unacceptable. The newer opinions which do not stem from one of these fundamental concepts prove, on examination, to be almost wholly unreasonable.

It is well to recall here that the men whose impressions we shall study do not attempt to solve the problem with which we are concerned, namely, whether Hamlet was a strong or weak character. But they do try to explain why Hamlet did not act, and in so doing implicitly answer the first question. For if we can find an acceptable theory explaining why Hamlet did not act and what the causes were preventing him from action, it will be more or less easy to show that Hamlet was or was not a strong character. Consequently, in studying these opinions we shall first find out what the reasons were for Hamlet's inaction, and then whether these reasons lead us to the conclusion that Hamlet was a strong or weak character.

We shall follow what we think is the only correct method in passing judgment on the opinions of the critics, namely, studying their works in conjunction with the lines of the play. Many of these theories, when studied independently of the drama in question, sound plausible enough; but when studied jointly with the play lose their efficacy. When this study is completed, we shall attempt to build up a theory of our own from the lines of the play.

The thesis has five main parts. The first part is introductory merely, states the history of the tale, and outlines the problem. This section is now almost completed and requires no further explanation.

In the second part we shall mention the requirements of a tragic hero, give the principal character traits of Hamlet, and then endeavor to



discover the points in which Hamlet fulfills the requirements of a tragic character, and those in which he fails to fulfill them.

In the third section we shall study the theories of the leading exponents of the so-called subjective school of thought on this subject. If they prove satisfactory, we shall accept them in whole or in part; if unsatisfactory, we shall reject them in whole or in part.

In the fourth section we shall endeavor to form an opinion on the criticisms of the leading exponents of the objective school of thought.

The fifth and final part of the thesis will deal with our own theory for the inaction of Hamlet. With this answer serving as a foundation for what is to follow, we shall attempt to prove that Hamlet was not a weak character.

We hope, when the thesis is finished, to have proved that Hamlet did not act because of his propensity to excessive reflection and melancholy, and that this propensity caused his downfall. We hope, too, to have proved that all these things can and do exist in a strong character.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. Hudson, H. N., Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters (Boston - Ginn & Company). Volume II, Page 263.

## CHAPTER II

## HAMLET AND THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A TRAGIC HERO

That Shakespeare meant Hamlet to be a tragic hero seems apparent, for Hamlet has all the external requirements of one. We shall find out what certain critics require in a tragic character in order that he should be really tragic, and then see if Hamlet has all these requirements. If Hamlet does have these requirements, we shall ipso facto make weakness of character less possible as the cause of his inaction. This point we hope to make, and if we make it, it will show that Shakespeare intended to make Hamlet a strong character. For if he meant him to be weak, he would not have given him all the qualities of a tragic hero, but would have shown by many instances before the climax that Hamlet was not a true tragic hero. If this point is proved, it will be a strong, though not conclusive proof, that Shakespeare meant Hamlet to be a strong character.

Concerning the requirements for a tragic hero Elisabeth Woodbridge says:

The essential requirement is that the dramatic hero be free to express himself in action, that he be given scope first to develop and then to express his individuality; and material power, social and political eminence are valuable only because they furnish these things, and only when they do so. What is required for great drama is not political or religious or social issues as such, but the enlargement of soul and stress of passion that sometimes accompanies great issues. What is needed for the tragic hero is not the crowned head, but the royal nature. (1)

Another requirement of the tragic hero, laid down by Aristotle,

is the general rule that he should be neither wholly bad nor wholly good, because in the one case the spectacle of the hero's suffering would not move our pity, in the other it would simply shock us. It may be laid down as a rule that tragedy is to be found, not in suffering merely, but in suffering accompanied by struggle. (2)

Woodbridge develops the same point at somewhat greater length:

The word "tragic" in the strictest sense means the kind of effect produced by the sight of a losing struggle carried on between a strong but imperfect individuality and the overpowering forces of life. The hero must be imperfect because, for one reason, a perfectly poised character is usually too nearly invulnerable for the opposing force to get a firm hold. For the best form of tragedy is found, according to Hegel, when the opposing force is closely united with the soul of the fighter himself - when it has effected a lodgment in the enemy's trenches and fights from within as well as from without. The hero is, as it were, his own worst enemy. So that one is almost inclined to state categorically that the hero must be thus imperfect, because the tragic struggle must be within him in order to be truly tragic.

But we have another class which we cannot ignore, and in which the tragic element is certainly of a different kind from that found in the other group. We have (in each of these cases) a tragic hero or heroes whose struggle is with outer circumstances, and whose fall is necessitated, not by inner weakness but by the brute strength of external fact. (3)

Three other points that influence the tragic hero either directly or indirectly are: 1) There must be a struggle and a losing one; 2) It must be a struggle in which the opposing and victorious forces may lie primarily either within the hero's own nature, or chiefly outside; 3) There must be the element of causality as the foundation for the losing struggle. These five points, according to Woodbridge, are absolute necessities for any hero that would be tragic.

Let us now take each point singly and study it in conjunction with Hamlet's nature and see whether he fulfills all these requirements.

The first characteristic, that "He must be free to express himself in action and to express his individuality" is certainly true of Hamlet, for the lines are interspersed with numerous deeds and long soliloquies by the tragic hero. Such incidents as Hamlet's meeting with the ghost, his arrangement of the play-scene, the murder of Polonius, the trip to England, the fight with the pirates, and the duel-scene are sufficient to prove that the action of the play is plentiful. And the fact that the hero is free to express his individuality throughout the play is apparent by the number and the length of the soliloquies. In Act I, Scene II there is a soliloquy beginning with the words "O! that this too solid flesh would melt," which continues for thirty more lines. And again in Act II, Scene II, a soliloquy beginning with the lines "Ay, so, God be wi' ye! Now I am alone. O what a rogue and peasant slave am I:" continues for fifty-seven more lines. And lastly in Act III, Scene I, a famous soliloquy begins with the words "To be, or not to be: that is the question;" and proceeds for thirty-four more lines. These soliloquies, independent of any other lines in the play, are certainly enough to show that Hamlet is free to express his individuality. The enlargement of soul and stress of passion, along with the royal nature, are plainly evident in Hamlet's character from these soliloquies.

The second requirement, that the tragic hero should be neither wholly bad nor wholly good, is also true of Hamlet. His harsh treatment of Polonius and Ophelia in the early parts of the play betray undesirable

traits in his character. His unchanging love for his mother, and his constant companionship with and implicit trust in his good friend Horatio manifest his better nature.

That there is a struggle and a losing one is easily apparent from even a superficial study of the play. The struggle going on in Hamlet's mind between obeying the command of the ghost and the doing of the actual deed is the foundation for the action of the whole play, and to miss this point would be to miss the whole point of "Hamlet" as a play.

The fourth characteristic, that there is a struggle, is also apparent. We could easily dispute as to where this force is, within the hero, or outside him; but we could not deny that there is a force and a struggle. And since we are going to attempt to prove later on that this force lies within the hero, namely in his propensity to excessive reflection and melancholy, we shall take for granted for the present that this force lies within him. And therefore this fourth requirement is certainly fulfilled.

The element of causality as the foundation for the losing struggle is true of Hamlet. By this causality we mean that the force which finally sends the hero down to defeat is due not to accident, but to some force over which the hero once had control, and which he unwittingly sets free on its course of destruction. Now this force, as we shall attempt to prove later on, is the propensity to excessive reflection and melancholy which the hero allows to gain possession of him. This element is necessary, since if the cause were simply accident, the result would be pathetic, but not tragic. Hence, all that is required is that Hamlet himself be the cause that sets this force free; and this seems to be apparent from what we

have said.

From this study it would seem that Shakespeare meant his character to be a dramatic hero; for he has given him all the external requirements of one. It does not seem probable that Shakespeare, if he meant to depict his character as a weakling, would give him all the external trappings of a tragic hero. It would seem more probable that if Shakespeare gave Hamlet all these external requirements of a tragic hero, he meant him to be one. Therefore we have enlisted Shakespeare on the side of those upholding Hamlet as a tragic hero, and therefore a strong character. But the question of the weakness or strength of Hamlet will still stand or fall on our answer to the question of the inaction of Hamlet.

This second chapter is not a part of the proof of Hamlet's strength, but it will make a difficult though not impossible task the attempt of anyone who asserts that Hamlet was a weak character; and it will make so much more easy the proof of one who asserts that Hamlet was a strong character. In attempting to solve the question of weakness or strength in Hamlet, the one and most important question left to be solved is why Hamlet did not act. This point we shall now discuss, studying, first of all, the more important and more widely accepted views on this question.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER II

1. Woodbridge, Elisabeth, The Drama: Its Law and Its Technique (Allyn and Bacon - Boston and Chicago - 1898). Page 28
2. Aristotle, The Poetics (London - William Heinenemann Ltd. 1927)  
Chapter XIII. Pages 45, 47, 49.
3. Woodbridge, Pages 36, 38, 39.



## CHAPTER III

## THE SUBJECTIVE SCHOOL OF CRITICS

Concerning this question of the reasons for Hamlet's inaction, two schools of thought have arisen. The first, school, the subjective school, maintains that Hamlet does not act because of some subjective deficiency or weakness. If he had not been just the kind of person he was, if he had been fitted for the task imposed upon him, he would immediately have taken a more direct course to accomplish his end. He himself is the obstacle; he procrastinates from his own nature, thus complicates the situation, and allows himself to be placed in compromising circumstances, which in the end bring about his utterly overwhelming downfall. This is the theory of the subjectivists, among whom are such great critics as Goethe, Schlegel, Vischer, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Dowden, and Bradley. Nearly all these opinions seem to imply that Hamlet was a weak character.

Let us now proceed to examine the opinions that have been offered by the great critics of this school. We shall begin by studying the four leading critics of this school. First of all we shall consider the opinion of Goethe; then we shall combine the study of the opinions of Coleridge and Schlegel, since they are quite similar; and lastly we shall examine what Bradley has to say.

Goethe, who is the father of much modern Shakespearean criticism, wrote his opinion when he was but twenty years old and never touched the subject again. Perhaps it may therefore be said that the following is the pro-

duction of a mind as yet immature and quite unworthy of the genius and great talent which Goethe afterwards manifested.

In studying Hamlet, Goethe first attempts to find out what kind of person Hamlet was before tragedy struck, and what most probably he would have been had no catastrophe occurred. He conceives him as a "royal flower springing from a noble stem," with a high sense of moral rectitude and of princely elevation, and with all the other qualities that would make him a pattern of youth and a perfect prince. But he also conceives Hamlet as a passionless individual, soft, with a love for truth and beauty, and with a soul in which no vice could take root. And when difficulty comes in the shape of his father's death, this tender flower allows itself to be trampled in the dust. A feeling of desolation and nothingness grip and will not leave him.

The second stroke of misfortune, the marriage of his mother, wounds him even deeper, leaves him even more desolate. The last prop to his slender thread of existence has been brushed away.

In such a state of mind is Hamlet, according to Goethe, when the ghost confronts him. But let Goethe himself tell the rest.

Figure to yourselves this youth, this son of princes; conceive him vividly, bring his state before your eyes and observe him when he learns that his father's spirit walks; stand by him in the terrors of the night, when even the venerable ghost appears before him. He is seized with boundless horror; he speaks to the mysterious form; he sees it beckon him; he follows and hears. The fearful accusation of his uncle rings in his ears, the summons to revenge, and the piercing, oft-repeated prayer, Remember me!

And when the ghost has vanished, who is it that stands before us? A young hero panting for vengeance? A prince by birth

rejoicing to be called to punish the usurper of his crown? No! trouble and astonishment take hold of the solitary young man; he grows bitter against smiling villains, swears that he will not forget the spirit, and concludes with the significant ejaculation, -

"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 whole 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 play seems to me to be composed. There is an oaktree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.

A lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him, - not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind, at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts, yet still without recovering his peace of mind. (1)

Now this is a very exceptional concept of the character of Hamlet, for it appears to be very one-sided. Goethe emphasizes the aesthetic side of Hamlet's character to the exclusion of many other important sides. And this concept of Hamlet is quite at variance with the Hamlet which Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote his play.

When Goethe was thinking of Hamlet as "a lovely, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero" he was unmindful of some very outstanding incidents of the play. For example, this concept of Hamlet certainly could not stand alongside the concept of the Hamlet of the fourth scene of the first act, who speaks to his comrades when they would prevent him from speaking with the ghost of his father:

My fate cries out,  
 And makes each petty artery in this body  
 As hardy as the Nemean Lion's nerve.  
 Still am I called. Unhand me, gentlemen,  
 By heaven! I'll make a ghost of him that lets me:  
 I say, away!

This concept of Hamlet is also at variance with Shakespeare's Hamlet in the fourth scene of the third act, when he is speaking with his mother in the privacy of her chamber. Hearing a noise behind the arras, and believing that the King is there, he whips out his sword and runs it through the arras killing Polonius. Listen to Hamlet's reaction to this deed and see how difficult it is to fit it in with Goethe's conception of Hamlet.

Thou wretched, rash, intruding, fool, farewell!  
 I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune;  
 Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.  
 Leave wringing of your hands; peace! sit you down,  
 And let me wring your heart; for so I shall  
 If it be made of penetrable stuff,  
 If damned custom have not brass'd it so  
 That it is proof and bulwark against sense.

This sentimental view of Hamlet fits in ill with the Hamlet of Shakespeare's play, who in the sixth scene of the fourth act wrote in a letter to his friend Horatio the following incident from his voyage to England.

Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very war-like appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valour; in the grapple I boarded them; on the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner.

The words that Hamlet utters in the first scene of the fifth act, when he and Laertes are grappling in the grave, could hardly come from such

a character as Goethe conceives Hamlet to be.

I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat;  
For though I am not splenetic and rash  
Yet have I in me something dangerous,  
Which let thy wisdom fear. Away thy hand.

All this does not seem to be the idle prattling of a mere spineless boy, but seems to be sharp and passionate words coming from the mouth of an aroused man. Laertes is pictured as a rough and ready fellow, more of a soldier than a scholar, and yet he recognizes something in Hamlet which he fears and sincerely respects.

This theory of Goethe's must be put aside, for it studies Hamlet, not as Shakespeare has conceived him in the play, but as Goethe has conceived him in his own mind. This opinion places a great amount of emphasis on the aesthetic side of Hamlet's character, a point which Shakespeare mentions but which he does not especially emphasize. Goethe goes on to conceive the character of Hamlet along these set lines that he has laid down for himself, omitting meanwhile many facts that pertain especially to the hero's character.

Goethe, it seems, built his idea of Hamlet from a few lines in the play which are true enough, but which do not contain the whole truth. In the drama Shakespeare endeavored to bring out the aesthetic side of Hamlet's character, for this fact plays an important role in the development of the plot; but he aimed to do something more, to bring out many other sides and traits of the hero's character.

As a consequence we shall have to reject this sentimental view

of the character of Hamlet, because in one sense it is too kind to him, and in another sense it does not do him justice. It is a half-truth, and we know that such things are much more dangerous than errors because their faults are not so easily discernible. Since so many facts of the play are in direct opposition to such a view of Hamlet, we cannot accept it as satisfactory and consistent.

We now pass on to a discussion of the opinions of Schlegel and Coleridge, which are the most widely accepted views of Hamlet's character and the reasons for his inaction, particularly in English speaking countries. Both wrote about the same time, with Schlegel's book appearing just before that of Coleridge. But the latter assures us, and with good reasons, that he had not seen Schlegel's book until his own had been published. Each, therefore, writing independently of the other came to almost the same conclusions in regard to Hamlet's character. Schlegel called the play a "tragedy of thought" in which Hamlet was completely lost in the labyrinths of his own mind. Coleridge thought that the natural balance between the mind of Hamlet and his imagination was thoroughly upset, the equilibrium between his real and imaginary worlds destroyed.

Schlegel thought that the tragedy was meant to be "a tragedy of thought," suggested by continual and unsatisfied meditation on the destiny of man, on the dark confusion of the events of this world, and designed to awaken the same meditation in the minds of the spectators. He thought that the object of the play was to show how a study which aims at exhausting,

to the farthest limits of human foresight, all the contingencies and all the possible consequences of a particular act, must paralyze the very power of acting. Although granting Hamlet many good qualities, Schlegel nevertheless accuses him of weakness:

But in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his [Hamlet's] weakness is too apparent; he does himself only justice when he implies that there is no greater dissimilarity than between himself and Hercules. He is not solely impelled by necessity to artifice and dissimulation, he has a natural inclination for crooked ways; he is a hypocrite toward himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination: thoughts, as he says on a different occasion, which have but "one part wisdom and ever three parts coward" . . . . . Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else; from the expressions of religious confidence he passes over to skeptical doubts; he believes in the ghost of his father as long as he sees it, but as soon as it has disappeared, it appears almost in the light of a deception. He has even gone so far as to say "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so;" with him the poet loses himself here in labyrinths of thought, in which neither end nor beginning is discoverable. The stars themselves, from the course of events, afford no answer to the question so urgently proposed to them. A voice from another world, commissioned it would appear, by heaven, demands vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect; the criminals are at last punished, but, as it were, by an accidental blow, and not in the solemn way requisite to convey to the world a warning example of justice; irresolute foresight, cunning treachery, and impetuous rage, hurry on to a common destruction; the less guilty and the innocent are equally involved in the general ruin. The destiny of humanity is there exhibited as a gigantic Sphinx, which threatens to precipitate into the abyss of scepticism all who are unable to solve her dreadful enigmas. (2)

Coleridge, on the other hand, thought that Shakespeare intended to portray a person in whose view the external world and all its incidents and objects were comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind.

Hamlet believed in external things in the same way that a man of vivid imagination, who shuts his eyes, sees what has previously made an impression on these organs. But let Coleridge's own words explain his theory.

In order to understand him [Hamlet] it is essential that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds. Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense; but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect; - for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action. Now one of Shakespeare's modes of creating characters is, to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakespeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditations on the workings of our minds, - an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions instantly passing through the medium of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a color not naturally their own. Hence we see a great, an almost enormous intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action, consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakespeare places in circumstances, under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment; - Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. (3)

Opinions such as the above which attempt to solve the riddle of Hamlet by saying that the tragedy is one of thought seem to reduce the play ultimately to an absurdity. It is almost impossible to refute the above theories from facts or lines in the play, for neither of these men in their written impressions refer to anything specifically said or done in the play. One way to find out whether these opinions are consistent with the play is



to compare them with certain well-known facts of the play and see how well they fit together.

First of all, these theories fail to satisfy because they fail, not in this or that detail, but as a whole. We feel almost instinctively, that whoever this person is about whom Schlegel and Coleridge are talking it is not Hamlet as we know him from Shakespeare's play. Secondly, it is partial both for and against Hamlet, and leaves many important facts of the play unexplained.

But let us study individual statements of these two men and see how well they can stand with the idea of Hamlet as we have it from Shakespeare's play. Schlegel says that the play is "a tragedy of thought in which Shakespeare was lost in the labyrinths of his own mind." This exclusive emphasis, as Mr. Dowden says, on the thought processes of Hamlet forces one to neglect the emotional side of Hamlet's character, something that cannot legitimately be done. It sounds like confusion of mind on the part of the person saying such a thing, for it seems to say that since the problem of Hamlet's inaction is so difficult to solve, there really isn't any answer, and Shakespeare himself didn't know what the answer was. Such a statement by Schlegel should be put forward, if at all, only when every other possibility has been exhausted. Judging on purely external evidence only, we cannot see the truth of such a statement, since the play has been held in such high popular esteem for so long. And if in the play Shakespeare were lost in his own mind, this mental confusion would certainly manifest itself elsewhere in the play. But it does not.

Another statement of Schlegel is that "the whole is intended to show that a calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting." This statement seems to be the foundation of Schlegel's whole theory, and it implies that a person who is of a reflective turn of mind finds action more difficult than anyone else, and the more a person is given to this reflectiveness the less he is inclined to action. If we were to take this statement and consider its truth or falsity in relation to people we know we would, I am sure, find a different answer. There are many people we know who are of a reflective mind who are also very active. In fact, sensible and correct action at times requires reflection and considerable thought, so that it seems that this statement of Schlegel's is not in accord with the facts of life.

One more statement of Schlegel is very misleading; it is that "Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else." Now this statement is very unfair to Hamlet. For where else in Shakespeare's plays shall we find such love as Hamlet had for his father. His love, too, for Ophelia shows that in spite of his treatment of her he had a deep respect for her innocence, simplicity, and sweetness. And all through the play, no matter how beset by difficulty or tortured by doubt, he makes definite and clear-cut decisions between good and evil. These facts seem to show that Hamlet did have a firm belief in these two persons and in this one fundamental fact.

Coleridge affirms that in Hamlet Shakespeare seems to have wished

to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds - an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed. Now it is difficult to prove that this statement is true, because we can no more appeal to Shakespeare, and there is nothing in the play which proves it. It seems, too, far-fetched and unlikely that Shakespeare would conceal the answer to the play so well and so deeply. I believe, that since we can offer a better and more apparent reason for what Shakespeare meant to portray in this drama we can well pass over this point.

In another place Coleridge asserts that the cause of Hamlet's delay is irresolution; and the cause of the irresolution is the reflective and speculative state of mind. This statement can easily be refuted by looking at people as we see them in daily life. It is far from being a fact that people of a reflective or speculative state of mind are given to irresolution. Quite the contrary is often enough the case, for men who are given to much thought are frequently men who do big deeds.

The last statement of Coleridge is one that seems to lie at the very root of his entire theory. In it Coleridge says that in Hamlet there is "an almost enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it". Now if this statement were true, it would mean that Hamlet would be unable to cope with any problem that contained the least difficulty or perplexity. But in the play Hamlet does many difficult deeds, which this enormous intellectual activity should prevent him from doing. He rushes after the ghost, kills Polonius, deals with the King's commission on the ship, boards the pirate vessel, leaps into the

grave to grapple with Laertes, and finally kills the King. If this intellectual activity is the cause of Hamlet's inaction in one instance, it fails to function as a cause of inaction in any other instance in the play.

The theories of these two men fail to satisfy, not because they disagree with certain lines in the play, or because they fail in this or that detail, but they fail as a whole. They make Hamlet one-sided and unlike the Hamlet we know from reading the play. And we may reject the theories of these two critics for the very good reason that they fail to substantiate their opinions by quoting lines from the play, a method, I believe, that would not help to make their criticisms scientifically acceptable.

Whenever we deal with the opinions of certain critics we get a feeling of inadequacy in the presence of profound learning and penetrating common sense. A feeling of awe and reverence for this vast and difficult problem preys on us at such a time, and a satisfactory original answer to the problem in hand seems hopeless. This always happens when we read the opinion of A. C. Bradley, who, to our way of thinking, is among those we have studied the best and most judicious of Hamlet's appraisers. His opinions we shall proceed to examine. His criticism and reasonable rejection of some of the theories offered by other men is very sane and exceptionally fair. His depiction of the inner workings of the mind and soul of the Queen is an excellent piece of work, and his treatment of many of the other characters in the play has been done in very clear and concise style. But in giving as the reason for Hamlet's delay an attack of melancholy which

robbed him of the full use of all his faculties and put him in a mood in which he was not a fit subject to make a serious decision, he has given an answer which, I believe, may prove to be not altogether satisfactory.

Bradley, first of all, maintains that no theory will hold water which places the cause of Hamlet's difficulties to any extent in external circumstances. And the cause of Hamlet's delay was, he believes, due not to an excess of reflectiveness, but to an abnormal state of Hamlet's mind, a state of profound melancholy.

Bradley goes about analyzing Hamlet by trying to reconstruct him in his normal state before any incident liable to upset him had taken place. He finds Hamlet normal in almost all respects, but does find in him three powerful tendencies, which if disturbed and set in motion could lead to dire and catastrophic consequences. The first of these powerful tendencies is an inclination to melancholy; the second is a moral sensibility; and the third and last is an intellectual agility that easily and quickly adapts itself to new problems and new points of view and analyzes them intently. Now Bradley believes that the death of the King, his father, and the hasty remarriage of the Queen is the cause that is able to and actually does set in motion one of these tendencies, that, namely, to melancholy. Once this seemingly unshakable fit of melancholy has seized Hamlet, he thinks, acts, and feels differently than he did at any other time. Besides all these things Hamlet is entirely unaware of this melancholy as a cause of all his trouble.

Bradley goes on to tell in detail how many difficulties this theory of melancholy answers.

It accounts for the main fact, Hamlet's inaction. For the immediate cause of this is simply that his habitual feeling is one of disgust at life and everything in it, himself included, - a disgust which varies in intensity, rising at times into a longing for death, sinking often into weary apathy, but is never dispelled for more than brief intervals. Such a state of feeling is inevitably adverse to any kind of decided action; the body is inert, the mind indifferent or worse; its response is "it does not matter," "it is not worth while," "it is no good." And the action required of Hamlet is very exceptional. It is violent, dangerous, difficult to accomplish perfectly, on one side repulsive to a man of honor and sensitive feeling, on another side involved in a certain mystery. (4)

But Bradley believes that all these obstacles would not prevent Hamlet from acting if he were in a normal state. His motives for acting, love of his father, loathing of his uncle, desire of revenge, and desire to do his duty would in ordinary circumstances be powerful enough to make Hamlet act, but they are no match for the mood of melancholy which has Hamlet in its toils.

Bradley continues:

Again this state (of melancholy) accounts for Hamlet's energy as well as for his lassitude, those quick decided actions of his being the outcome of a nature normally far from passive, now suddenly stimulated, and producing healthy impulses which work themselves out before they have time to subside. It accounts for the evidently keen satisfaction which some of these actions give to him. He arranges the play-scene with lively interest, and exults in its success, not really because it brings him nearer to his goal, but partly because it has hurt his enemy and partly because it has demonstrated his own skill. . . . It accounts for the pleasure with which he meets old acquaintances, like his "school-fellows" or the actors. . . . It accounts no less for the painful features of his character as seen in the play, his almost savage irritability on the one hand, and on the other his self-absorption, his callousness, his insensibility to the fates of those whom he loves. (5)

And finally Bradley mentions two important facts of the play which

must be explained, and which are explained only by this theory of melancholy. This point is a real clinch for Bradley's opinion, because what we are trying to find is an opinion which will explain all the facts of the play, and this is the only theory which seems to do just that. Bradley is the one critic, so far as we know, who mentions these two difficulties, and since his solution of them and the other problems of the play is creditable enough, his is the only theory that can be accepted.

But let us return to Bradley's own words for an explanation of these two important points.

Finally, Hamlet's melancholy accounts for two things which seem to be explained by nothing else. The first of these is his apathy or 'lethargy'. We are bound to consider the evidence which the text supplies of this, though it is usual to ignore it. When Hamlet mentions, as one possible cause of his inaction, his 'thinking too precisely on the event,' he mentions another, 'bestial oblivion;' and the thing against which he inveighs in the greater part of that soliloquy is not the excess or misuse of reason, but this bestial oblivion or 'dulness,' this 'letting all sleep,' this allowing of heaven-sent reason to 'fust unused;'. . . . So, in the soliloquy of the second scene of the second act, he accuses himself of being 'a dull and muddy-mettled rascal' who 'peaks (mopes) like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of his cause,' dully indifferent to his cause. So when the ghost appears to him the second time, he accuses himself of being tardy and lapsed in time; and the Ghost speaks of his purpose being almost blunted, and bids him not to forget.

The second trait which is fully explained only by Hamlet's melancholy is his own inability to understand why he delays. This emerges in a marked degree when an occasion like the player's emotion or the sight of Fortinbras's army stings Hamlet into shame at his inaction. 'Why,' he asks himself in genuine bewilderment, 'do I linger? Can the cause be cowardice? Can it be sloth? Can it be thinking too precisely on the event? And does that again mean cowardice?' . . . . These are the questions of a man stimulated for the moment to shake off the weight of his melancholy, and, because for the moment he is free from it, unable to understand the paralysing pressure which it exerts at other times. (6)

This "melancholy" theory is the only one, so far as I have seen, which pays serious attention to the facts of the play, and makes an attempt to solve the problems therein contained. It is far and away the most reasonable and satisfying of the theories we have studied, and in only one point are we going to attempt to change it. This point is one which Bradley himself suggests, but which, we think, he does not emphasize as sufficiently as the facts of the play seem to require.

As we saw, Bradley mentioned three tendencies which he found in Hamlet when he was in a normal state, and before anything upsetting had happened to him. These three tendencies are an inclination to melancholy, a moral sensibility, and a versatile and easily adaptable intellectual nimbleness. Now Bradley places the burden of blame for what follows in the play on this tendency in Hamlet towards melancholy, and, we believe, rightly so. But we do not believe that he places anywhere near enough emphasis on another of these causes which is almost as important as this 'melancholy.' This point is the third and last which Bradley himself mentions, namely, an intellectual aptitude which easily and quickly adapts itself to new problems and to new points of view. Now this tendency is, we believe, thoroughly awakened in Hamlet by the same cause that set this melancholy in motion, namely the death of the King and the hasty remarriage of the Queen. It appears in numerous places throughout the play, and although only a secondary cause of Hamlet's inaction, it is nevertheless a very important cause.

In order to realize how important a cause is this intellectual versatility in Hamlet, let us try to realize the kind of person Hamlet



would have been without it. From what Bradley has already said, we can take for granted that Hamlet was thrown into a fit of unshakable melancholy by the death of his father and the almost immediate remarriage of his mother. As a consequence Hamlet is pensive, morose, and dull. His senses are torpid, his mind is sluggish, and his will inactive. He knows what he has to do, and nevertheless he shirks from doing it. This inaction is certainly due partly to melancholy. But notice what happens because of this melancholy and the puzzling situation in which Hamlet finds himself. That intellectual waywardness begins to manifest itself, and Hamlet, instead of facing the problem before him, allows his mind to wander and to feed itself on more suitable propositions. The manifestations of this extravagant intellectual rambling in Hamlet are apparent in the soliloquies, of which this play certainly has its share.

The first of these soliloquies appears in the second scene of the first act when Hamlet finds himself alone on the stage and begins:

O! that this too solid flesh would melt,  
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;  
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!  
 How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
 Seem to me all the uses of this world.  
 Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,  
 That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
 Possess it merely.

This wandering from the point at issue continues in this soliloquy for twenty-three more lines. And again in the second scene of the second act Hamlet goes off again on a much longer self-analysis in the soliloquy beginning:

Ay, so, God be wi' ye! Now I am alone.  
 O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I:  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all his visage wann'd,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit?

Early in the third act Hamlet lets this mind of his go wandering again on the motives for and against self-destruction. His thoughts prove to be interesting enough, but his mind is once again far away from where it ought to be.

This soliloquy begins with the words,

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them?

and continues for twenty-two more lines before it ends with those significant words which may be a possible clue to the mystery of what is bothering Hamlet:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action.

And so, too, this is what seems to be troubling Hamlet. His melancholy causes him to be pensive and morose, but this intellectual agility is

constantly running away with him and drawing his mind away from the problem in hand. And all this has a direct bearing on the outcome of the play. For who can say what may have happened to Hamlet had he been troubled by melancholy alone, and had not this intellectual discursiveness of his been allowed free reign? He certainly would still have been confronted by a difficult problem, but he might possibly have found some solution to it had he kept it constantly before his melancholic mind. And this point is the whole foundation of our difficulty with Bradley's theory, namely that he does not seem to place sufficient emphasis on the constant digression of Hamlet's mind from the problem in hand. He mentions the fact, it is true, but he does not, we believe, give it the attention which the facts of the play seem to call for. These soliloquies continue in the play until the very last act, but we believe that we have given sufficient matter from the play to prove that Hamlet's mind was in the habit of wandering off to fields more suitable for his theoretical mind, and that this fact has a decided influence on the outcome of the play.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. Von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (Translated by Thomas Carlyle. Published by "The Amaranth Society." Copyright 1901 - by J. H. Moore & Company). Volume VII, P. 222-223.
2. Schlegel, August W., Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature (Translated by John Black. London, George Bell & Sons 1902). P. 405-406.
3. Coleridge, Samuel T., Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other Dramatists (Oxford University Press, London, Humphrey Milford). P.176-7.
4. Bradley, A. C., Shakespearean Tragedy (Macmillan and Co., Limited. London, 1932). Page 122.
5. Ibid., Pages 123-124.
6. Ibid., Pages 125-126-127.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE OBJECTIVE SCHOOL OF CRITICS

The second school, the objective school, with such men as Ziegler, Klein, Werder, Corson, Ulrici, and Hudson in their midst, claims that Hamlet's conduct is due entirely to the nature of his task. According to the view of this group, Hamlet's mission is to depose the King and disgrace him, and thus set matters right before the world. The adulterer, murderer, and usurper must taste the full bitterness of a felon's death, but not until Hamlet has unmasked him and shown him to the world as the monster he really is. If he were to kill the King before doing this, he would commit an egregious blunder, for then the guilt of both murders would descend on his own head. And people would have a plausible reason for suspecting him of the crimes, for by them he has cleared his own way to the throne. And if he were called to trial he could bring in no ghost as a witness. This opinion, of much more recent origin than the former, was suggested by Ziegler, put with great force by Klein, and given full and adequate expression by Karl Werder.

But the theories of these objective critics, although superficially plausible, are fundamentally unsound and unsatisfactory. This group of men, like the others, has ignored some important and evident facts of the play, and seems to have accepted only those which fit in with its theories. All these critics of the objective school have, as has been said, placed the cause of Hamlet's delay in the peculiar circumstances which

surrounded the hero and not in any defect in his character. They leave the character of Hamlet untarnished by a single stain, and endeavor to show that the course he pursued was the only one which could be pursued with any wisdom. This new procedure is almost diametrically opposed to the procedure of the subjective school. We shall now proceed to examine the theories of these men in detail.

In dealing with the theories of the critics of this school we shall, in the first place, treat the opinions of Klein and Werder together; then we shall take up Ulrici's theory; and lastly we shall discuss what Hudson has to say.

Klein maintains that the reason for the inaction of Hamlet is not any defect in his character, but rests in the very difficult situation in which he found himself. Hamlet, he says, refuses to act, not from cowardice or any natural weakness of character, not from an idle fondness for reflection, but because he is wise enough to see that action will bring only harm and disgrace in its wake. If Hamlet were to kill the King, the only living person who would have any knowledge of the King's guilt would be Hamlet. If he were to do the deed, he would certainly be called to trial and asked the reason. What reason, Klein asks, could Hamlet give? How absurd the story of the ghost would sound at a public trial, especially if he could not summon it as a witness. And, too, people would certainly not be blind to the fact that in killing the King he had cleared away the last obstacle in his path to the throne.

But let us have a closer look at Klein's opinion as he relates it in his own words:

The tragic root of this deepest of all tragedies is secret guilt. . . For this deed of blood there is no human eye, no human ear. The horror of this crime is its security; the horror of this murder is that it murders discovery. . . This Cain's deed is known to no one but the murderer, and to Him who witnesses the murderer's secret remorse. The son has no other certainty of the unwitnessed murder than the suspicion generated by his ardent filial love, the prophecy of his bleeding heart, "O my prophetic soul!" - - no other conviction but the inner psychological conviction of his acute mind; no other power of proving it but that which results from the strength of his own horror-struck understanding, highly and philosophically cultivated by reflection and education; no other testimony than the voice of his own soul. . . . His power to act festers in contact with the secret ulcer of the crime, and the poison, which with the sudden effect wrought upon the pure blood of the father, works on in the son, and corrodes the sinews of his resolution.

But how then? Is the subjective, moral conviction which, for the popular sense, is reflected from without by the poet in the Ghost, - is not this motive sufficient to give wings to the revenge of the son? Is not this inner conviction the catchword, "the cue to passion," which must spur him on to take public vengeance upon a crime which no one suspects but himself? No! if Hamlet is not to be pronounced by all the world to be what he feigns, stark mad. No! if Hamlet is not to appear to all Denmark, with all its dignitaries and nobles at its head, otherwise than a crazy homicide; not though he appeals ten times over to the "Ghost" that appears to him; No! if he would not appear in his own eyes as a black-hearted John-a-dreams, as a visionary, a crazy ghost-seer; he the free-thinking, knightly prince, with his powerful understanding. In the nature of the crime, I repeat, the solution of the riddle is to be sought. The assassination for which there is no evidence to satisfy the popular mind, is the veil of the tragedy. The quality of the deed necessitates the apparent inaction of Hamlet and his subtle self-tormenting; they come not from cowardice nor any native weakness of character, not from an idle fondness for reflection. (1)

Let us turn now to the opinion of Werder who explains his evaluation of Hamlet in more lucid language. He declares that Hamlet's first duty is not to kill the King but to bring him to confess the dastardly murder. He pictures Hamlet as a noble and true hero full of the spirit

of his task. For a while the situation forces him to be inactive because there is no other course open to him, but he seizes the first chance, the coming of the actors to Elsinore, to obtain his end. This advent of the actors coupled with the murder of Polonius brings the final victory to Hamlet. Werder's own words will give us the remainder of his opinion.

What is Hamlet to do? What is his actual task? A sharply defined duty, but a very different one from that which the critics have imposed upon him. It is not to crush the King at once - he could commit no greater blunder - but to bring him to confession, to unmask and convict him. That is Hamlet's task, his first, nearest, inevitable duty. As things stand, truth and justice can come to light only from one mouth, that of the crowned criminal, and if he or someone connected with him does not speak, then the truth will be forever hidden. That is the situation! Herein lie the terrors of the tragedy. . . .

If Hamlet had misunderstood the Ghost's meaning and had assassinated the King before he had unmasked him he would really save rather than destroy him. He would make the King immortal, for the sympathy of the world would flow to him, and through all time the royal criminal would be regarded as the innocent victim of a wicked plot. Instead of being condemned he would be canonised. That his death should appear to be the result of divine justice would be impossible, for the insane act would cause an impenetrable veil to fall between the light of truth and the eyes of the world. Hamlet, as the one to whom alone the truth can ever be known, would turn that truth to falsehood, if he thus caused it to remain forever unproved to the world. He would actually be a most efficient accomplice in the murder of his father if he furnished no proof of the crime, but presented himself as the sole accuser and judge of the criminal. What Hamlet has most at heart after he sees the Ghost is not the death, but on the contrary, the life of the King, henceforth as precious to him as his own. (2)

Arguments such as the above sound convincing and plausible when read independently of the play. But to study them closely and in connection with the play is to remove all their force and effectiveness. For these men have taken all the facts of the story that strengthen their own theories,



and other glaring ones they seem to have omitted or left unanswered. Such a procedure is very unscientific, and consequently many inconsistencies arise when we endeavor to fit these theories in with the facts of the play.

Werder and Klein assert that the reason for the inaction of Hamlet is that he realizes that if he were to assassinate the King at once, he would defeat his own purpose of bringing the murderer to justice and of punishing him in the eyes of the people. If this is the reason for Hamlet's delay, he himself seems to be entirely ignorant of it. He seems to be wrestling with a problem far different from the one of bringing the King to justice. We know this by his actions, but more especially by his words. For in the soliloquies in which Hamlet voices the thoughts which are in his mind he provides us with the reasons for his inaction. We are certain of this, for he has no reason for trying to deceive anyone, and there could be no other cause for the presence of these lines in the play except to tell us what is going on in Hamlet's mind.

Since neither Klein nor Werder has discussed certain lines which would seem to refute their theories, it is unknown what they would say in reply. But it is impossible to understand how they could maintain their theories in the light of what Hamlet says in the soliloquy in Act II, Scene II, in which he asks himself why it is that he cannot act:

Yet I,  
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,  
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,  
Upon whose property and most dear life  
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?

and again in the same soliloquy he wonders why he has not long ago killed the King:

Swounds, I should take it, for 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.

Later in the same speech he wonders why he talks instead of acts:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave  
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,  
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,  
A scullion!

And in Act IV, Scene IV Hamlet says:

How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge!

Hamlet in the same soliloquy speaks:

Now, whe'r 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.

These lines seem to blast thoroughly any theory which claims that the only reason for the inaction of Hamlet is that he realizes the utter futility of any plan calling for the immediate assassination of the King.

If we consider these lines, we know that such is not the question that is bothering Hamlet.

This one reason, namely, that from the beginning to the end of the play Hamlet never makes the slightest reference to any external difficulty would refute these two theories, and for that matter, any theory which was founded on external problems. The soliloquies show us that Hamlet's problem is chiefly internal, and it is almost inconceivable that Shakespeare meant the chief problem of the drama to be external if Hamlet never once during the play mentions such a problem. But there are other reasons for rejecting these two theories. They are, first, Hamlet never refers to any external difficulties, but always assumes that he can obey the Ghost; second, Hamlet did not plan the play-scene in the hope that the King would betray his guilt to the court, but he planned it to see if the Ghost had spoken the truth; and third, Hamlet never once talks of bringing the King to public justice, but he does talk of using his "sword" or his "arm" to revenge himself and the Ghost on the King.

Now all these are facts alongside of which it is difficult to understand how theories like those of Klein and Werder can stand. If a critic would be allowed to pick out certain facts of the play and to ignore others, almost any theory could be spun and be made to sound plausible. But if a list of all the facts and incidents of the play were to be made, such a theory would collapse. We think the theories of Klein and Werder collapse under the weight of the facts.

Many critics regard Ulrici as belonging to the subjective school of thought, mainly, perhaps, because he wrote his opinions before the theories of Klein and Werder were published. Critics of his day who were not aware of the objective mode of procedure in studying Hamlet, a method which developed later, regarded him as a subjectivist, and the name remained. But a close study of a synopsis of his opinion should provide stronger and more convincing reasons for placing him in the objective school.

Ulrici emphasizes the fact that Hamlet is of a philosophical and scholarly turn of mind and has a great love for beauty and truth. He affirms that it is decidedly against Hamlet's natural disposition to commit an act which is demanded only by external circumstances. This highly tuned moral nature of Hamlet causes to arise a double contradiction, one internal, one external. The internal contradiction is "between Hamlet's striving after a free, self-conscious, and self-chosen sphere of action, and the un-free vehemence, indiscreetness and passionateness of his temperament, which perpetually thwarts his striving." The external contradiction is "between the character of the hero and the power of circumstances, which impose upon him a deed, which, although appearing substantially and morally necessary, is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible to bring into a free moral form."

But Ulrici's own words will further clarify his opinion.

Hamlet is by nature of an artistic, or if it be preferred, of a philosophical turn of mind. This is the general foundation of his character. . . . Shakespeare places special emphasis upon Hamlet's taste and love for poetry, his intimate acquaintance with the dramatic poetry of his age, his fine judgment in regard to the object of the drama and the art of its representation, as is proved

by his conversation with the Players. Express emphasis is also placed on Hamlet's aversion, anger and contempt in regard to all untruth, hypocrisy, pretense, and falsehood, in regard to a smooth varnished appearance, as well as regards all want of culture, uncouthness and vulgarity. . . . Everywhere, on every page, and on every line the poet continually reminds us of Hamlet's own lofty mental culture, his eminent intelligence, his clear judgment, the acuteness and profundity of his reflections on the nature of man, the object of life, and the problems of art and philosophy. . . . Not originally inclined to sadness and melancholy, he seems, in accordance with the very fortunate position of his external circumstances, to have cherished a happy view of life, even though he always was observant, pensive, and of a reflective turn of mind. . . . This Hamlet was before the death of his father, or rather, this is Hamlet in the original and undisturbed state of his nature. And for this very reason it is decidedly against his natural disposition to commit an act which is demanded only by external circumstances, and which is internally foreign to him. . . . It is not the want of power and ability, not weakness of will and resolution, but the nature of the deed imposed upon him, which deters him. . . .

The various groups which the poet required for carrying out his intentions, in this case also interact with, and counteract one another easily and naturally - as everyone must perceive without being specially reminded of the fact. This results spontaneously, as everywhere in Shakespeare, in a well-arranged and progressive course of the action in a definite direction. It proceeds from a double contradiction: on the one hand from the internal contradiction in Hamlet's character, between his striving after a free, self-conscious, and self-chosen sphere of action, and the unfree vehemence, indiscreetness, and passionateness of his temperament, which perpetually thwarts his striving; on the other hand from the external contradiction between the character of the hero and the power of circumstances, which impose upon him a deed, which, although appearing substantially and morally necessary, is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible to bring into a free, moral form. The reconciliation of this double contradiction is, so to say, the problem which the action has to solve, and which, therefore, the poet presents to us in the first act, in the exposition, although not with sufficient clearness and distinctness. (3)

This theory of Ulrici has, at first sight, a superficial plausibility which is quite reasonable and satisfactory. But it is a theory

in the very broadest use of that word, and it should be called rather a general idea or impression. Ulrici simply gives his ideas of Hamlet and the play, and offers no lines or incidents from the play in support of this opinion.

Ulrici asserts that the reason for Hamlet's inaction is a double contradiction, the first part of which is a contradiction in the character of Hamlet "between his striving after a free, self-conscious, and self-chosen sphere of action, and the unfree vehemence, indiscreetness, and passionateness of his temperament, which perpetually thwarts his striving." What Ulrici means by this contradiction, it seems, is that Hamlet constantly wishes to act independently and in obedience to his own convictions; that is, that Hamlet wishes to be in a state of perfect nature, when the mind is always clear, the judgment unimpeded by any obstacle, and the will ever-ready to follow this perfect judgment. But Hamlet is prohibited from attaining this perfect state by the passionateness and extreme vehemence of his temperament, which is continually throwing him off this chosen track and putting obstacles in his way. If Hamlet did not have such strong passions, or if he had better control over them, he would have a much better chance of attaining this ideal state of nature. And once he has attained it, this part of the contradiction would no longer exist.

This is certainly a possible solution to the mystery of Hamlet's inaction. But how probable is it? First of all, this answer is a very profound one, and one which is present in the play, but so well concealed that an ordinary reader, like the bulk of those for whom Shakespeare wrote the play, would probably never find it. And Shakespeare has not in any

of his other plays gone to such lengths to conceal the answer to the problem.

Secondly, there is not a line in the play, not even a suggestion, that Hamlet is aware of such a difficulty. He vocalizes his thought constantly throughout the play, giving vent to his most secret thoughts, and never by the merest whisper does he show that he is struggling with such a question. Does this mean that all the soliloquizing in the play is so much verbiage, and that Shakespeare did not mean by it to give the reader a hint as to the clue of the mystery?

It can be maintained, of course, that Hamlet does not necessarily have to be aware of such a contradiction existing within him, and this would heighten the pathos of the play. But certainly, then, Shakespeare would have dropped a hint somewhere in the play, when Hamlet was not within earshot, that would help the reader or listener to arrive at a satisfactory solution. But no such hint is to be found in the play.

The second part of this contradiction is an external one, which exists "between the character of the hero and the power of circumstances, which impose upon him a deed, which, although appearing substantially and morally necessary, is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible to bring into a free, moral form." What is most probably meant by this contradiction is that Hamlet has a deed forced upon him that it is morally necessary to do, and because of the peculiar circumstances of the act he cannot determine whether the act is good or evil, and therefore cannot act until he is able to determine in his own mind which is true.

This opinion can be made to seem very reasonable if we study the opinion independent of the text of the play. But attention to the latter is fatal to such a theory. Like the first contradiction, scarcely a line of the play can be produced to support it, and not a line has been produced by the man proposing it. And a fair amount of matter from the play can be produced in disproof of such a theory.

First of all, even when Hamlet doubts the honesty of the Ghost, he shows no doubt as to what his duty will be if the Ghost turns out to be honest: "If he but blench I know my course."

Secondly, at many times during the play Hamlet suggests that he is dull, muddy-mettled, cowardly, and given to craven scruples as causes for his neglect of duty, but never once does he suggest that he is bothered by doubt about the good or evil of the deed.

And thirdly, there are lines of the play that are in direct contrast to this opinion. In the soliloquy in Act II, Scene II Hamlet says:

Swounds, I should take it, for 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.

And in Act IV, Scene IV Hamlet soliloquizes:

How all occasions do inform against me,  
 And spur my dull revenge!

And in the same soliloquy Hamlet speaks:



Now, whe'r 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.

It is difficult to see how such a theory as Ulrici's could be maintained in the light of these facts and lines from the play Hamlet. In the search for what is at the very bottom of this mystery of Hamlet, we shall have to proceed farther than the opinion given by Ulrici. We shall have to find a theory which explains all the major difficulties, and, if possible, most of the minor ones, without being in direct contrast to any fact or set of facts in the play.

The last and one of the more modern critics of the objective school is H. N. Hudson, an American Shakespearean scholar of note. The similarity between his solution and those offered by Klein and Werder is quite close, and Hudson himself admits that the reading of the opinions of these two men confirmed what was already in his own mind. His opinion, however, is worthy of comment, not only because he is a great critic, but because it shows that this objective side of the picture was no mere fad, as he published his theory some forty years after Klein and Werder had published theirs. We have already seen that there are some more or less modern critics who hold the subjective opinion about Hamlet, but Hudson is one of the moderns who upholds the objective theory. He believes that the answer to

Hamlet's inaction lies wholly and entirely in objective facts, that is, facts independent of and external to Hamlet.

Hudson's admiration for the character of Hamlet is apparently almost boundless. He thinks that Hamlet is an heroic but pathetic character, who is placed by accident in a situation which he cannot master, and "he is not master of it, simply because, as things stand, such mastery is quite beyond the power of any man, without help from above." So that, according to Hudson, any man, however strong, however virtuous, however mentally gifted, if he were placed in the same situation in which Hamlet found himself, could not deal with it more appropriately or more satisfactorily than does Hamlet. And the tragedy of the play is that this perfect character creation of Shakespeare is placed in circumstances with which no human being could successfully deal.

Hudson tells us that the only two people who know of the murder of Hamlet's father are the present King and Hamlet himself. But the source of Hamlet's information is such a mysterious one that no one would believe him were he to make the charge of murder against the King. Hamlet is called upon to revenge this crime, which from its nature can be proved only from the criminal's own mouth. From no other source can Hamlet get a particle of evidence to prove the King guilty. Killing Claudius would, therefore, be a murder of the proof and an egregious blunder. Claudius must, therefore, be kept alive until he can be made his own accuser, or until "either his conscience shall drive him to 'proclaim his malefactions,' or else his guilt, to barricade its safety shall thrust upon him other crimes so

monstrous and so evident, that all shall see him as he is, and acknowledge his punishment just." But Hudson continues in his own words.

He might take off Claudius as secretly, and in some such way, as Claudius had taken off his father; but this would be to stain himself with the most abominable guilt and baseness. Whatsoever he does, he must be ready to avow it in the face of all Denmark, and to stand responsible for it. Come what may, he must, he can, use no arts but manly arts. Observe, then, what a dreadful dilemma he is placed in; he must punish, it is his most sacred duty to punish, a crime which it is not possible for him to prove, and which must not be punished until it has been proved. (4)

All this Hudson gives as evidence that Hamlet is caught in an impossible situation. In the light of such circumstances, waiting is the only sensible solution. To do anything else would be the sheerest folly for Hamlet. He must wait until the King confesses or until he can find a material source of information which he can make use of in a law court.

In the following lines is the kernel of Hudson's theory of Hamlet and his inaction in his own words.

A horrible crime has been committed, a crime the meanest, the blackest, the hatefullest that man is capable of. Claudius has murdered his own brother and his King; stealing upon him in his sleep, and pouring a slow but deadly poison in his ear, which so wrought that he seems to die of a natural though mysterious disease. The deed was done so secretly and with such consummate craft as to elude and defy all human discovery. It was and could be known only to the author of it, and to God; even the victim of it knew nothing of it till after his death. No trace of the crime, not an atom of evidence exists, save in the conscience of the criminal himself. So that the hideous secret lies buried in the grave of the murdered; and no revelation of it is possible on earth but by his coming out of the tomb. Through this act of fratricide and regicide, Claudius has hewed his way to the Danish throne; he having beforehand made love to the Queen, and seduced and corrupted her. . . .

Hamlet is called upon to revenge this crime which is altogether

unproved, and which from the nature of the case, is utterly unprovable, except from the criminal's own mouth; apart from this source, he has not, and cannot get, a particle of evidence available for impressing upon the world wherein he lives a judicial or even a moral conviction of the King's guilt. This is just the cardinal point of Hamlet's case. So that, matters standing thus, killing Claudius would be not so much a punishment of the guilty as a murder of the proof. (5)

This is the way Hudson conceives the story of Hamlet and of the situation in which the hero finds himself. According to Hudson, Hamlet is faced with the impossible situation which he has described in the above lines. Well might Hudson wonder how any human being could deal successfully with such a problem without help from above. But Hudson continues to describe the situation in detail, and tells us that Hamlet, before the problem of the play confronted him, was a normal happy youth with no signs of any great weakness. He is interested in things chiefly intellectual, but shows no sign of being overbalanced in any one direction. But the coming of the Ghost changes all this, and fills Hamlet with the most excruciating and tormenting agony and suffering. The coming of the Ghost is the beginning of the dramatic struggle. But Hudson continues:

From the time of his interview with the Ghost, all is changed with Hamlet; all, both without and within; henceforth he lives in quite another world, and is himself quite another man. All his old aims and aspirations are to be sternly renounced and thrust aside; life can have no more joys for him; his whole future must be cast in a new shape. All the duties upon which his thoughts have been hitherto centered are now merged in the one sacred, all-absorbing task enjoined upon him as from Heaven itself. (6)

Remembering the difficulty of Hamlet as Hudson described it, we

begin to realize why it is that Hamlet does not act, cannot in conscience or in good sense act. He must wait and see in which way the King moves. He must be exceedingly wary and cautious in order to trap the King into a confession of his guilt. Meanwhile he must have recourse to a plan of conscious waiting.

We, to be sure, long impatiently to have the crowned murderer get his deserts, because the whole truth of his guilt is known to us; but the people of Denmark, Hamlet's social and political world, know nothing of it whatever, and can never be convinced of it, should he proceed in that way. For the Ghost's disclosures were made to his ear alone; nobody else heard a word of them. And is it to be supposed that the Ghost's tale will be received on his sole word? that, too, in behalf of an act by which he has cut away the only obstacle between himself and the throne. . . .

The critics insist upon it, that the one thing which Hamlet ought to do, and which he would do if he had any real backbone of executive energy, is, to strike the avenging blow with instant dispatch, on the first opportunity. Such an opportunity he has, or can make, at almost any time. But to do this would be both a crime and a blunder, and a blunder even more than a crime. How shall he justify such a deed to the world? how vindicate himself from the very crime which he must allege against the King? For, as he cannot subpoena the Ghost, the evidence on which he is to act is available only in the court of his own conscience. To serve any good end, the deed must so stand to the public eye as it does to his own; else he will be in effect setting an example of murder, not of justice. Can a man of his "large discourse looking before and after" be expected to act thus?

Most assuredly, therefore, the deed, which the critics so loudly call for, is the very thing of all others which Hamlet ought not to do, which he must not do; which, moreover, he cannot do, for the simple reason that he is armed with such manifold strength. . . . As the only possible evidence is to come from Claudius himself, Claudius must by all means be kept alive, till he can be made his own accuser, and a witness against himself. . . . Meanwhile, Hamlet must, above all things, refrain from the avenging stroke; must strain his utmost powers, if need be, to that end. That he thus does hold himself back from the deed to which his burning passion for justice and his righteous thirst for vengeance are continually urging him, - in all this I must still think he

displays an almost superhuman degree of that very thing which he is alleged to be without.

Thus the hero's hands are inextricably tied, - but tied, not through any defect, nor through any excess, in himself; not through any infirmity of will or courage or resolution, but from the insurmountable difficulties of his situation. It is not, it is not, that an intellectual impetuosity, or a redundancy of thought, cripples or in any way retards his power of action; but that the utter impossibility of acting, without covering himself, in all human account, with the guilt of parricide and regicide, prodigiously stimulates and quickens his powers of thought, and keeps his splendid intellect in an incessant transport of exercise. And so the very plan of the drama, as I understand it, is to crush all the intellectual fragrance out of him, between a necessity and an impossibility of acting. The tremendous problem, the terrible dilemma which he has to grapple with, is one that Providence alone can solve, as Providence does solve it at the last. (7)

This opinion of Hudson's resembles so closely the opinions of the first two men of the objective school whom we have already treated, that the same answers could be given to refute it. Like nearly all the critics of the objective school of thought, Hudson places the cause of Hamlet's inaction in a contradiction. This contradiction, he says, exists between the necessity of revenging the King, and of giving a satisfactory reason for the deed to the Danish public when inquiries are made about the murder. Now, according to Hudson, the first part of this contradiction, the killing of Claudius would be a more or less easy task for Hamlet, but the second part is almost impossible of fulfillment because of the peculiar circumstances, and this it is which prevents Hamlet from acting.

This is a satisfactory answer when it is regarded independent of the play, but attention to the lines of the play is fatal to it. From

the beginning to the end of the play there is not the least hint that such a problem exists in the mind of Hamlet, and if we can judge correctly from the soliloquies he seems to be worried and delayed by an entirely different problem. Since Hudson believes that Hamlet does not act and kill the King because such a plan of action would murder the proof and prevent justice from being done, it is difficult to see how he could correlate this opinion with the following lines of the play. In Act IV, Scene IV Hamlet says:

Now, whe'r 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. Examples gross as earth exhort me:

and again in the same soliloquy Hamlet speaks:

How stand I then,  
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep, while, to my shame, I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain? O! from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

These are two examples from the play to show that Hamlet was not worried about what Hudson seemed to think he was. In the first quotation it is evident that Hamlet is endeavoring to find out just what it is which prevents him from acting. He admits that he has cause, and will, and

strength, and means to do this deed, and examples gross as earth, and yet he finds that the deed is still undone. And the army of Fortinbras marching forth to lay down their lives for a worthless piece of ground almost stings him into action, and he is shamed to think that these men go forth on such a duty with little or no motive, and he who has plenty of motives finds himself unable to act. These lines certainly cannot agree with the statement of Hudson that Hamlet is consciously delaying in order to trap the guilty King into a confession, or to find a reason for killing him that he can make satisfactory in a lawcourt.

There are other lines of the play which would set at naught such a theory as Hudson's, but the above-quoted lines are, I believe, sufficient for this theory. If proof for the rejection of such a theory were necessary besides the fact that Hamlet never once refers to such difficulties as Hudson mentions, why is it that Hamlet throughout the play assumes that he can obey the Ghost? When Hamlet planned the play-scene he was trying to convince himself by the King's reaction that the Ghost had spoken the truth, and he always took for granted that he would and could obey the Ghost once this fact was made certain. And lastly Hamlet never once seems to be concerned about satisfying public justice, but does speak about using his sword or his arm to wreak vengeance upon the King. Even when he is positive that the King is guilty, he does not show any concern about bringing Claudius to public justice, but he does say "Now am I not justified in using this arm?"

We shall, therefore, have to reject the opinion of Hudson as



untenable because the contradiction of the play as he states it cannot, we have seen, be the reason for Hamlet's delay. There is too much divergence between the theory of Hudson and important facts of the play. There simply must be another theory which will be more acceptable and more in accord with the main facts and incidents of the play. This theory we shall now attempt to find.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. Klein, J.L., Taken from his opinion as found in the New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, edited by Horace H. Furness.  
J. B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1877. Volume IV, Pages 297, 298.
2. Werder, Karl, The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery. (Translated from the German by Elizabeth Wilder). Pages 48, 49, 52, 53.  
G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1907.
3. Ulrici, Hermann, Shakespeare's Dramatic Art. (Translated from the German by L. Dora Schmitz). Volume I, Pages 484, 485, 486, 500.  
George Bell and Sons, London, 1876.
4. Hudson, H. N., Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters. (Ginn and Company, Boston). Volume II, Page 276.
5. Ibid. Pages 268, 280, 281.
6. Ibid. Page 276.
7. Ibid. Pages 277, 278, 281, 282.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

After rejecting as unsatisfactory all the theories which we have examined in this thesis, we shall propose one which we hope will be satisfactory. This theory cannot be definitely classified as either subjective or objective since the theory places the causes of Hamlet's inaction within the character of the hero, and nevertheless places no guilt on the character of Hamlet for all the incidents which followed naturally from these causes. If the test of a satisfactory theory is that it gives an answer to all the difficulties presented by the inaction of Hamlet, this theory will, perhaps, be satisfactory.

We are endeavoring to prove in this thesis that Hamlet was not a weak character, but a strong one. In order to do this we must, as we have said, prove that the reasons for Hamlet's inaction were not cowardice or any other motive unworthy of a strong tragic hero. Our theory is a twofold one. We assert that Hamlet did not act because he found himself in the grip of an unshakable fit of melancholy, and because he allowed the reflective tendency in his nature full liberty to roam at will. If we can satisfactorily prove this assertion, we can also prove that Hamlet was not a weak character.

That melancholy was a cause of Hamlet's inaction has been dealt with capably and satisfactorily by Mr. Bradley. This assertion need be dealt with in only a general way here, as Bradley's opinion has already

been discussed earlier in this thesis. The second cause, Hamlet's bent for excessive reflection, will be treated at somewhat greater length after that.

Hamlet himself gives us a hint of the cause of his disorder in the second scene of Act II in a soliloquy in which he says:

The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil; and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy -  
And he is very potent with such spirits -  
Abuses me to damn me.

This is the only time in the play that Hamlet precisely mentions the word melancholy, but there are many indications in the play that the disorder of Hamlet's soul and mind are due to something that is very much like melancholy. When he first appears on the stage in the first act, the King asks him, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" And the Queen follows this up with:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
Do not forever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust;  
Thou know's't 'tis common; all that live must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity.

Again in the second scene of the second act the Queen speaks thus to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern!  
Moreover that we much did long to see you,  
The need we have to use you did provoke  
Our hasty sending. Something have you heard  
Of Hamlet's transformation; so I call it,

Since nor the exterior nor the inward man  
 Resembles that it was. What it should be  
 More than his father's death, that thus hath put him,  
 So much from the understanding of himself,  
 I cannot dream of: I entreat you both,  
 That, being of so young days brought up with him,  
 And since so neighbour'd to his youth and humour,  
 That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court  
 Some little time; so by your companies  
 To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather,  
 So much as from occasion you may glean,  
 Where'raught to us unknown afflicts him thus,  
 That, open'd, lies within our remedy.

And in the same scene of the same act, to Rosencrantz and Guilden-  
 stern who have come to feel him out, Hamlet says:

I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent  
 your discovery, and your secrecy to the King and Queen  
 moult no feather. I have of late, - but wherefore I  
 know not, - lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of  
 exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my dis-  
 position that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a  
 sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air,  
 look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majes-  
 tical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no  
 other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation  
 of vapours.

These lines along with the soliloquies are sufficient indications  
 and proofs that melancholy was the base of all Hamlet's troubles, or if it  
 was not melancholy it was something so closely akin to it that it will not  
 be necessary here to distinguish between the two.

But let us find out from Bradley what this theory of melancholy  
 does to answer the important problems of the play. First of all, he says,  
 it accounts for the main fact, Hamlet's inaction. For the immediate cause  
 of that is simply that his habitual feeling is one of disgust at life and

everything in it, himself included, a disgust which varies in intensity, rising at times into a longing for death, sinking often into weary apathy, but is never dispelled for more than brief intervals.

Secondly, this theory accounts for Hamlet's energy as well as for his lassitude, those quick decided actions of his being the outcome of a nature normally far from passive, now suddenly stimulated, and producing healthy impulses which work themselves out before they have time to subside. It accounts for the keen satisfaction which some of these actions give him, such actions as the arrangement of the play-scene, his gleeful anticipation of the countermining of the King's designs in sending him away, and his satisfaction and pride at the vigour he displayed on the voyage. It accounts for the pleasure with which he meets old acquaintances, like his school-fellows and the actors. The former observed in him 'a kind of joy' at first, though it is followed by 'much forcing of his disposition' as he attempts to keep his joy and courtesy alive. It accounts for the painful features of his character, his almost savage irritability, his self-absorption, his callousness, his insensibility to the fates of those whom he despises, and to the feelings of those whom he loves.

And lastly, this theory of 'melancholy' accounts for two things which are not accounted for by anything else. The first of these is his apathy or lethargy, and there are sufficient indications in the play to show that he was lethargic. In the soliloquy in the second scene of Act II, Hamlet accuses himself of being 'a dull and muddy-mettled rascal' who 'peaks like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of his cause.' And so in the fourth scene of the third act, when the Ghost appears the second time, Hamlet

accuses himself of being tardy and lapsed in time; and the Ghost speaks of his purpose being almost blunted and bids him not to forget. And finally in the soliloquy of the fourth act, what Hamlet inveighs against chiefly is this 'bestial oblivion' or dullness, this 'letting all sleep' this allowing of heaven-sent reason to 'rust unused.' Surely what all this points to is not a condition of excessive and useless mental activity, but rather one of dull, apathetic, brooding gloom.

The second trait which is fully explained only by Hamlet's melancholy is his own inability to understand why he delays. He is stung into shame at his inaction by the players and the sight of the army of Fortinbras, and he asks himself in genuine bewilderment 'Why do I linger? Can the cause be cowardice? Can it be sloth? Can it be thinking too precisely on the event? And does that again mean cowardice? What is it that makes me sit idle when I feel it is shameful to do so, and when I have cause, and will, and strength, and means' to act? A man irresolute merely because he was considering a proposed action too minutely would not feel this bewilderment. These are the questions of a man stimulated for the moment to shake off the weight of his melancholy, and, because for the moment he is free from it, unable to understand the paralysing pressure which it exerts at other times.

These indications and reasons are, I believe, sufficient to show that melancholy was not only a possible cause for the inaction of Hamlet, but the only probable and acceptable one. But let us examine the lines of the play a little closer and see whether melancholy is the whole and entire cause of Hamlet's inaction.

One of the three powerful tendencies which Bradley found in the

character of Hamlet, and which if disturbed, might bring about dire consequences, was the speculative rambling of Hamlet's mind. Now this speculative roaming, or ability to roam, in Hamlet is definitely disturbed, and although Bradley mentions this fact, when he comes to give us his opinion he seems to skim over it ever so lightly. Judging from the number of times that this desire for speculation interferes with the completion of Hamlet's work in the play, Shakespeare must certainly have intended it to be one of the important reasons for Hamlet's inaction.

The sudden death of Hamlet's father, the King, and the hasty re-marriage of his mother to Claudius set in motion two powerful tendencies in Hamlet. The first of these is his melancholic mind, which we have, I believe, proved as the only acceptable cause for the inactivity of Hamlet. The second of these tendencies set in motion is this speculative genius. Hamlet, as Shakespeare wrote it, would certainly not have been what it was, had not this intellectual versatility in the hero been aroused. Even though Hamlet had in the play been in the grip of a fit of melancholy, the solution of the drama might well have been different from what it actually was, had not Hamlet continually evaded the problem in hand and allowed this speculative mind of his to go roaming through this world and the next, feeding on things more acceptable to his temperament. Had Hamlet been simply melancholic, he might well have found some solution to the problem with which he was faced, but the combination of this melancholy and the roving genius of his mind is an impossible barrier to his finding the solution.

This speculative genius of Hamlet, or his escaping from the pressure which the completion of the problem places on him, is very much



in evidence throughout the play. In the second scene of Act I, after the King and Queen have advised Hamlet to put on a more cheerful disposition, and have left Hamlet alone on the stage, the hero speaks:

O! that this too solid flesh would melt,  
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;  
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!  
 How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
 Seem to me all the uses of this world.  
 Fie on't! 'tis an unweeded garden,  
 That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
 Possess it merely.

These lines do not indicate a straying from the problem because the Ghost has not as yet given his command. But it does indicate that the tendency for speculation has already been aroused in Hamlet by the death of his father and the quick remarriage of his mother.

After the Ghost has appeared to Hamlet and left his command with him, Hamlet promises to fulfill it and the Ghost disappears. Then Hamlet seemingly forgets all about the command and his own promise. It is not until the last part of the second act that Hamlet is stung into shame at his inaction by the advent of the players. And instead of endeavoring to bring the problem to his mind, he allows this powerful speculative genius of his full sway, and the completion of the problem is delayed.

When the players have left the stage along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet finds himself alone on the stage and soliloquizes:

Ay, so, God be wi' ye! Now I am alone.  
 O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I:  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all his visage wann'd,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing?  
 For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to Him or he to Hecuba  
 That he should weep for her? What would he do  
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,  
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
 The very faculties of eyes and ears.

Yet I,  
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,  
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
 And can say nothing; no, not for a king,  
 Upon whose property and most dear life  
 A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?  
 Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?  
 Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?  
 Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,  
 As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this ?

Ha!  
 Swounds, I should take it, for 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. Bloody, bawdy villain!  
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
 O vengeance!

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave  
 That I, the son of a dear father murder'd  
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
 Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,  
 And fall a-cursing, like a very drab, a scullion!  
 Fie upon't! fo! About, my brain! I have heard,  
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 Have by the very cunning of the scene  
 Been struck so to the soul that presently  
 They have proclaimed their malefactions;  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
 Play something like the murder of my father  
 Before mine uncle; I'll observe his looks;

I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench,  
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil; and the devil hath power  
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy -  
 And he is very potent with such spirits -  
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this: the play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

These lines indicate very well what freedom and limitless boundaries this speculative genius of Hamlet enjoyed. It proves that he had a keen and penetrating mind which could delve so deeply into extraordinary problems, but if he had harnessed these forces and applied them to the difficulty he faced, even with his melancholic mind, the answer could well have been different from what it turned out to be.

And again in the first scene of the third act, Hamlet runs away from the problem, and allows his unfortunate desire for speculation more liberty. He speaks:

To be, or not to be: that is the question;  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
 No more; and, by a sleep to say we end  
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;  
 To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. There's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life;  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
 The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action.

These lines indicate how deeply this reflective bent of Hamlet's mind could go when allowed to wander unmolested. Certainly, if this soliloquizing is nothing else, it is a waste of time as far as the completion of the problem is concerned. We can only wish that Hamlet had spent all the time and intellectual energy which he expended on these thoughts on the problem which he should have been solving.

And in the fourth scene of the third act, Hamlet comes accidentally upon a chance to solve his problem entirely and expeditiously. He comes upon the King at prayer and speaks thus to himself:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;  
 And now I'll do it; and so he goes to heaven;  
 And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:  
 A villain kills my father; and for that,  
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven.  
 Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.  
 He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
 With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
 And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?  
 But in our circumstance and course of thought

'Tis heavy with him. And am I then reveng'd,  
 To take him in the purging of his soul,  
 When he is fit and season'd for his passage?  
 No:  
 Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent;  
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
 Or in the incestuous pleasures of his bed,  
 At gaming, swearing, or about some act  
 That has no relish of salvation in't;  
 Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
 And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
 As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:  
 This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

Here Hamlet had an excellent chance to fulfill the command of the Ghost, but this intellectual versatility betrays him and goes scooting off to lands unknown when it should have been bracing itself for a very important task.

Once again in the fourth scene of the fourth act, Hamlet's shame at his inaction is again stirred by the sight of the army of Fortinbras going off to do battle for a worthless piece of land. And Hamlet instead of acting thus chides himself:

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 unus'd. Now whe'r 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. Examples gross as earth exhort me:

Witness this army of such mass and charge  
 Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
 Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd  
 Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
 Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
 To all that fortune, death and danger dare,  
 Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great  
 Is not to stir without great argument,  
 But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
 When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,  
 That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,  
 Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
 And let all sleep, while, to my shame, I see  
 The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
 That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
 Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
 Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
 Which is not tomb enough and continent  
 To hide the slain? O! from this time forth,  
 My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

All these lines containing the boundless speculation of Hamlet's mind are certainly proof that this genius of his in which Bradley found seeds of danger has been fully aroused. It is a dangerous tendency, as we know from the results, for Hamlet, allowing this capacity of his full liberty, allows other difficulties to pile up on him, and instead of dealing with them, he relieves the pressure on his mind by these long and wordy soliloquies on the deepest mysteries of life. If Hamlet had not had this powerful reflective tendency, or if he had kept it under better control, in spite of the fit of melancholy, the catastrophe in which the drama ends may well have been less violent, or may have been avoided altogether. At least, these possibilities are present, and consequently this intellectual versatility and wanderlust of Hamlet's mind must be considered as a cause which has some consequence on the outcome of the plot.

Bradley does not place much emphasis on this speculative genius of Hamlet as a cause for his inaction, and we would like to alter his theory to this extent at least, that almost as much emphasis as a cause be placed on this tendency for speculation as is placed on Hamlet's melancholy.

This combination theory explains all the difficulties which Bradley's theory explains and clears up a few difficulties which might arise from Bradley's neglect of some lines of the play. But this theory ought to be accepted principally because it explains very well the chief difficulty of the plot, namely, the inaction of Hamlet. This inaction is due, as we have said, to Hamlet's melancholy and the extraordinary reflective bent of his mind. Hamlet believed himself capable of obeying the command of the Ghost, and yet he could not seem to accomplish it. He is the victim of a pervading lethargy and of his own boundless theorizing.

The proposition we have put forward is only a theory, not an established fact. It seems, however, to answer all the important difficulties of the play. And since we must select some reason for the inaction of Hamlet before we can determine his weakness or strength, we choose this reason as the most satisfactory.

If this theory explaining the passivity of Hamlet is accepted, it follows easily that Hamlet was not a weak character, but a strong one. For the reasons of his inactivity are not cowardly reasons, but reasons which show him to be the victim of circumstances, and therefore a tragic hero.

There are, however, two other strong reasons for believing that Hamlet was a strong character. They are: first, because it is antecedently improbable that Hamlet is a weak character, for Shakespeare's art would

forbid such a flaw; and second, because it is impossible to reconcile weakness with the courage which Hamlet manifested on so many occasions in the drama.

Weakness in a tragic hero, at least such weakness as some of the critics accuse Hamlet of, is a flaw that Shakespeare's art would forbid. In every drama there is an obstacle to be overcome, otherwise it is difficult to understand how there could be any kind of action in the play. To overcome any kind of dramatic obstacle Shakespeare would certainly not create a weakling and place him in circumstances which were too powerful for him to cope with, for then he would not have a tragic hero. In such a case as this we can argue from effect to cause in order to show that Hamlet was not such a character. For if he were, he would arouse only our pity; for we would see a man placed in circumstances which would overwhelm him, and we would know meanwhile that if we or any of our acquaintances were placed in the same situation, we should be able to solve the problem easily. Such a man would arouse our sympathy or our disgust; he would in no case arouse our admiration. But we know that the general reaction of audiences to the play is not one of pity or sympathy or disgust for the hero, but is one of admiration, and genuine interest in this psychological study of human nature. If Hamlet were the weakling that some of the critics maintain he is, such would not be the general reaction of audiences to the play.

From what we know of Shakespeare in his plays, it is patent that he could certainly create a tragic hero who could cope in some degree with a situation which he (Shakespeare) had conceived for him. For it would be



admittedly against all the canons of the dramatic art consciously and knowingly to create a weakling for such a role. The only other reason for Hamlet's being a weakling would be that Shakespeare, although he endeavored to create a tragic hero, in reality created a character that is anything but that. But all that we know of Shakespeare and his art argues against the possibility of this being true. That Shakespeare could create a tragic hero no one would deny. For he created many of the greatest tragic heroes that are known in the realm of drama. Some of these he conceived before he wrote Hamlet, and others after he wrote it. So it cannot be argued that Hamlet is the creation of an inexperienced artist, or the product of a once brilliant genius now decayed. That it was simply a mere slip on the part of Shakespeare is well-nigh impossible, for he was at this time in the most mature period of his life and work, and was writing what practically every critic concedes to be his greatest play. That he should be guilty of such a fault at such a time and in such circumstances is almost absurd.

The second reason for believing that Hamlet is a strong character is that it is impossible to reconcile weakness with the courage which Hamlet exhibited on many occasions in the drama. It would be next to impossible for Hamlet to show such great and unwavering courage in so many incidents of the play, and yet when a peculiar situation happened that he should manifest such despicable cowardice. It would be far more reasonable to believe that Hamlet showed real courage in all these incidents, and when he found himself in these unusual circumstances he was more puzzled than afraid. For if he manifested so much courage in other things, it would be possible that such a situation might overcome him eventually, but it would

not overcome him to such a degree that he would be a frightened child rather than a strong-willed man. But he exhibits too much passion and feeling throughout the entire play for anyone to doubt seriously that he is a courageous man.

It would be a difficult problem to reconcile weakness with the man who speaks the following lines.

Hold off your hands!  
My fate cries out,  
And makes each petty artery in this body  
As hardy as the Nemean Lion's nerve.  
Still am I call'd. Unhand me, gentlemen,  
By heaven! I'll make a Ghost of him that lets me:  
I say away!

or the following:

I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat;  
For though I am not splenetic and rash  
Yet have I in me something dangerous,  
Which let thy wisdom fear. Away thy hands!

or again:

Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this,  
give these fellows some means to the King: they  
have letters for him. Ere we were two days old at  
sea, a pirate of very war-like appointment gave us  
chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put  
on a compelled valour; in the grapple I boarded  
them: on the instant they got clear of our ship,  
so I alone became their prisoner.

These lines show Hamlet's courage in the presence of the Ghost, in the grave when he is grappling with Laertes, and finally when the ship on which he is bound for England is pursued, and Hamlet proves to be the

first one to baerd her in the ensuing fight. They should be sufficient reasons for believing that in the course of the play Hamlet is not a weak character.

In summing up, the question of Hamlet's weakness will rest entirely and ultimately on the theory proposed for his inactivity during the play. In searching for the reasons for this passivity, unassailable and positive proof can probably not be found. The next best thing to do is to propose a theory which will be acceptable. Once a theory is accepted, the other steps which follow it can be proved. We have asserted that the reasons for the inaction of Hamlet is a combination of his propensity to melancholy and to excessive reflection. If this theory is accepted, then it follows logically that Hamlet was a strong character. We offer, in addition, the facts of Shakespeare's art, and the other courageous acts of Hamlet during the play to prove this contention. That Hamlet is a strong character is, we hope, a well-established.

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The thesis, "Is Hamlet a Weak Character?", written by David Ignatius Condon, S.J., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Rev. J. P. Burke, S.J.                      September 6, 1940

Rev. Burke O'Neill, S.J.                  February 20, 1940