INTERPRETATIONS OF HAMLET'S DELAY

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Sometime in the opening years of the seventeenth century the first stage production of Shakespeare's Hamlet was presented. Obviously the play was acted frequently in the immediately succeeding years, for the unauthorized first edition, which was published in 1603, asserted on its title page that Hamlet had been acted many times in the city of London and in the two universities of Cambridge and Oxford. Although there is almost no information regarding the reception of Hamlet by the Elizabethan audience, Bradley has speculated that the play was probably a favorite from the very first.1 Whether or not the play was considered successful by the audience of the early seventeenth century, however, is irrelevant to the student of Shakespearean criticism, since the people of the seventeenth century left few records of their reactions to literary works.

Not until the eighteenth century was there any literary criticism of consequence regarding Hamlet, or any of the other Shakespearean plays for that matter. Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare, an anonymous work published in 1736 and

1A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 91.
generally attributed to Sir Thomas Hanmer, is the earliest work we have that gives any detailed attention to character analysis in the works of Shakespeare. Hanmer's book was followed by several eighteenth-century English criticisms of Shakespeare, and by the end of the century Hamlet was being discussed not only in England, but in Germany and in France as well.

Since the eighteenth century, the amount of critical material on Hamlet has grown so profusely that today there is almost an overwhelming abundance of material on this play. Bradley has asserted that the protagonist of the play has been the subject of more discussion than any other character in literature.\(^2\) Ernest Jones says not only that more has been written about Hamlet than about any other literary character, but also that more has been written about Hamlet than about any person who actually lived, excepting Jesus Christ, Napoleon, and Shakespeare.\(^3\)

Certainly there can be no doubt about the popularity of Hamlet in the twentieth century. This play has truly been kept alive in the last two centuries by the large number of discussions that have appeared about it, by the frequent stage presentations, and by the vast number of readers of the play. We may then proceed to ask why Hamlet has

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 90.

\(^3\)Ernest Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus, p. 22.
attained such acclaim. The answer can lie only in Shakespeare's working of his materials, particularly in his complex development of the character of Hamlet, the protagonist of the play.

Perhaps the most universally discussed problem in the interpretation of the character of Hamlet is the reason for his delay in carrying out the Ghost's commands and revenging the murder of his father. Certainly Shakespeare makes no mention of the reason for Hamlet's delay. The fact that critics have never been able to untangle this mystery proves that the solution is not presented in an obvious form in the play.

Despite the mass of criticism regarding Hamlet's delay and the diversity of the ideas in these criticisms, the discussions, as a whole, fall into logical schools of thought. This thesis will attempt to ascertain the recent developments in Hamlet criticism that pertain to the delay theme and to discover the relationships of these criticisms to the earlier ones of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such an attempt is not merely vexatious, but rewarding in that such a compilation helps one not only to appreciate and understand the writings on the problem of Hamlet's delay, but also to develop his own theory about the problem.

Before proceeding with the delay theme in the Shakespearean Hamlet, however, let us turn to the other versions of the play that existed before Shakespeare and see why the protagonist delays in these plays. It is a well-known fact that Shakespeare
did not invent his own plots, but that he borrowed them from earlier, well-known works.

When Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, he was not introducing a new form of tragedy with the revenge play. In fact, the origin of the revenge play is to be found in the tragedy of blood, which prevailed in the tragedies of the ancient Romans, particularly in the plays of Seneca.

In the late sixteenth century a type of drama influenced by the Senecan tragedy of blood was introduced to the Elizabethan stage. This new type of tragedy, later known as the revenge play, was introduced by Thomas Kyd in The Spanish Tragedy, which was entered into the Stationers' Register in 1592.4

During the following ten or twelve years the revenge play gained considerable approval, and the audience demanded more and more plays of this type. Consequently the playwrights of this period wrote numerous revenge plays.5 We find Shakespeare, then, sometime during these years redeveloping an already familiar play into Hamlet, the culmination of the revenge plays.6

4Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy, p. 100.
6Thorndike, Tragedy, op. cit.
In defining the revenge play, Thorndike says,

The revenge tragedy, a distinct species of the tragedy of blood, may be defined as a tragedy whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge, leading to the death of the murderer and often the death of the avenger himself.7

There are several characteristics of the revenge plays, all of which exist in Hamlet. Revenge is the theme; the problem is one of hesitation, delay; madness, real or feigned, appears; there is a feeling of intrigue; the slaughter element exists; minor motives appear (the passion of Claudius for Gertrude and the minor revenge motive of Laertes); there are soliloquies and reflective elements.8

As a typical revenge play we may look at Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy. In this play, after several preliminary scenes, Horatio, Hieronimo's son, is murdered. Although Hieronimo does not know who the murderers are, he dedicates his life to finding them and revenging his son's murder. Bel-imperia tells him in a letter written in her own blood that the murderers are Lorenzo and Balthasar, but Hieronimo fears trickery. After a series of events, however, he learns definitely that Bel-imperia's letter is true. At this news Hieronimo is plunged into a frenzied agitation bordering on madness. Affecting a feigned reconciliation with Lorenzo,

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8Tbid., pp. 204-206.
he stages a play in which he stabs Balthasar to death as a part of the action of the play. Bel-imperia then stabs Lorenzo and afterward herself. After murdering Lorenzo's innocent father, Hieronimo kills himself, thus ending his vow of revenge with his own death. By comparing *The Spanish Tragedy* with *Hamlet* we are able to see the extent to which *Hamlet* was influenced by the other revenge plays.

Thorndike says, "Shakspere, we have seen, neither invented the type, for Kyd must be credited with that; nor did he set the fashion from 1599 on, for Marston almost certainly preceded him." Thus we see in *Hamlet* not the innovation of a new type of tragedy, but the artistic development of an already popular form of drama.

As to the ultimate source of *Hamlet* we know almost nothing. The earliest version which could have exerted any influence upon the play as written by Shakespeare was found in *Histoires Tragiques* by Belleforest. The fifth edition of this work, which was published in 1570, was the first edition to contain the Hamlet story. In all probability *Histoires Tragiques* was not translated into English before it was translated and published in London in 1608, several years after the composition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. There is a common reason for both Hamlet's madness and for his

delay in Belleforest. In the second chapter of *Histoires Tragiques* we find the following:

The prince Hamblet perceiving himself to bee in danger of his life, as being abandoned of his owne mother, and forsaken of all men, and assuring himself that Fengon [Claudius] would not detract the time to send him the same way his father Horvendile [the elder Hamlet] was gone, to beguile the tyrant in his subtilties (that esteemed him to bee of such a minde that if he once attained to mans estate he would not long delay the time to revenge the death of his father) counterfeiting the mad man with such craft and subtil practices, that hee made shewe as if hee had utterly lost his wittes: and under that vayle hee covered his pretence, and defended his life from the treasons and practices of the tyrant his uncle.10

In the Belleforest version of the Hamlet story, then, Hamblet is a resolute avenger; he feigns madness and delays killing the King because he is on guard for his life. External difficulties are clearly the reasons for Hamlet's failure to revenge his father's murder in the Belleforest version, since he attains his revenge at his first opportunity, after his return to Denmark from England. At all times before this, Hamblet has ostensibly been unable to perform his duty; in fact, it has taken all his ingenuity to retain his life. In Belleforest, then, there is no mystery concerning either Hamlet's insanity or his delay. Undoubtedly he feigns madness and prolongs the execution of his filial duty through physical necessity.

Between the Belleforest version and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* another version of the play existed. This lost

version, known as the Ur-Hamlet, was probably written around 1588-1589. The author, who was possibly Thomas Kyd, seemingly took the central section of the Belleforest play and retold it, probably retaining the external difficulties and the feigned madness.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1710, a little more than a century after the so-called Ur-Hamlet was written, a play entitled Der Bestrafte Brudermord existed in Germany. This play, which had probably been acted in Germany for some time, contains virtually the same plot as Shakespeare's Hamlet. Possibly Der Bestrafte Brudermord is a survival of Hamlet, a play acted in 1626 at Dresden by a company of English actors under John Green.\textsuperscript{12} Many scholars believe that this German play owes its origin to the Kydian version of the play. There is a great diversity of opinions regarding the source of Der Bestrafte Brudermord, but they are hardly pertinent to this study, our main concern in examining this version being the reasons in this play for Hamlet's madness and for his delay.

In this play Hamlet clearly feigns madness so that he can more easily carry out the instructions of the Ghost. In Act One, scene six, Hamlet says,

\textit{Horatio, I will so avenge myself on this ambitious man and adulterer and murderer that posterity shall talk

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{11}George Lyman Kittredge, editor, \textit{The Complete Works of Shakespeare}, p. 1145. \\
\footnote{12}Hardin Craig, editor, \textit{Shakespeare}, p. 709. 
\end{footnotes}
of it for ever. I will now go, and, feigning madness, wait upon him until I find an opportunity to effect my revenge.  

Later Hamlet reasserts the reason for his feigned madness and for his delay. In Act Two, scene five, he says,

My worthy friend Horatio, through this assumed madness I hope to get the opportunity of revenging my father's death. You know, however, that my father is always surrounded by many guards; wherefore it may miscarry. Should you chance to find my dead body, let it be honorably buried; for at the first opportunity I will try my chance with him.  

In Der Bestrafte Brudermorde, then, Hamlet delays because the King is undoubtedly so well-guarded that Hamlet's immediately executing his task would be an utter impossibility. Hamlet feigns madness so that he will have a better chance for carrying out his revenge.

We now see that in these versions of the Hamlet story there are adequate reasons for both Hamlet's madness and for his delay. In Shakespeare's play, however, there is no statement that Claudius is guarded, no specific explanation for Hamlet's madness. This lack of concrete information within Shakespeare's play for Hamlet's delay is undoubtedly the reason for the diversity of opinions concerning the delay theme, and, possibly, it is partly responsible for the popularity of the play. We may now leave these versions of the Hamlet story and proceed to the play that Shakespeare wrote.

13Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 126.
14Ibid., p. 128.
CHAPTER II

EARLY CRITICISMS

Although the plot of Hamlet is so familiar that we need not give a detailed summary of the play, a brief resume will perhaps prove helpful. It will be remembered that when we first see Hamlet, he is in a state of deep sorrow, resulting from his father's death and from his mother's hasty remarriage to Claudius, her brother-in-law. To this sad prince appears his father's ghost, who informs Hamlet that Claudius murdered him in order to attain the throne. The Ghost then bids Hamlet to revenge the murder, but not to taint his mind nor to contrive against his mother. Leaving Hamlet to carry out these instructions, the Ghost vanishes.

Instead of immediately executing the commands of the Ghost, however, Hamlet feigns madness and delays. Seeming to question the identity of the Ghost, Hamlet stages a play in which a sleeping king is murdered by his brother, who then marries the queen. Claudius, through his disturbance over the play, confirms Hamlet's already strong belief.

Hamlet is then summoned to his mother's chamber. On his way he finds Claudius in prayer and starts to perform the commands of the Ghost, but, not wishing to send Claudius to Heaven, he sheathes his sword and proceeds to his mother's
chamber. While there he kills Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, thinking that he is the King. Because of this act and Claudius's fear of Hamlet, the young prince is shipped off to England.

Hamlet escapes, however, and upon his return he is met by Laertes, Polonius's son, with whom he quarrels. Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel, having been persuaded by Claudius to use a poisoned rapier so that Hamlet will be killed. Fearing that Laertes will be unsuccessful, Claudius prepares a cup of poisoned wine for Hamlet.

In the duel Laertes succeeds in stabbing Hamlet, who seizes the sword and stabs Laertes with it. The Queen, meanwhile, has drunk the poisoned wine. Hamlet, realizing that he is dying, stabs Claudius, thus executing the command of the Ghost at the end of the play.

Of the earliest reactions to Hamlet, those of the seventeenth century, we know very little. Formal Shakespearean criticism not having come into being during this century, all our information relating to Hamlet is found in the allusions of other writers who lived during Shakespeare's lifetime and in the following years of the seventeenth century.

The Hamlet allusions of the early seventeenth century bear definite markings of the Kydian ancestry of the play.\(^1\) As the century progressed, however, the Kydian associations

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disappeared and the allusions became indicative of the play's being regarded as exclusively Shakespearean.\(^2\)

The allusions of the seventeenth century seem to indicate that Hamlet was widely regarded as a malcontent avenger. Concurring with this idea of Hamlet's being malcontent was the belief regarding Hamlet as mad. These two beliefs were not incongruous, however, malcontentism being considered a malady hovering between melancholia and insanity.\(^3\) This mad, malcontent prince was evidently met with great favor by the people of the seventeenth century.\(^4\)

In viewing the reactions of the seventeenth century, we must remember that there was a paucity of copies of the play in printed form; most of the people of this age, therefore, received their knowledge of the play through the dramatic productions of the theatrical companies. Hence the reactions of the actors became the reactions of the people. Probably Hamlet's madness was overplayed, thereby bringing about the belief that Hamlet was mad.\(^5\)

Through our observation of these allusions of the seventeenth century we see that these reactions to Hamlet did not receive wide acclaim in the following centuries because they were few and inadequately discussed. We can do little but recognize that the people of the seventeenth century probably

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 12.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 16.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 17.
\(^5\)Ibid., p. 19.
liked *Hamlet* and recognized the protagonist as a mad, malcontent avenger.

During the seventeenth century the only writing regarding the delay was found in the allusions to Hamlet's character, this criticism being indeed vague and, consequently, hardly utile to us in studying Hamlet's delay. As the years passed, however, and the eighteenth century criticism came into full existence, *Hamlet* criticism began crystallizing into a definite entity, Hamlet's delay being a topic of surmounting interest.

The years of the middle and late eighteenth century proved to be the formative years in the development of the various schools of thought regarding Hamlet's delay, for certainly in these years we find the beginnings of many of the future schools of thought in *Hamlet* criticism, particularly of the sentimental theory, of the external difficulties thesis, and of the melancholia theory. The relevance of these criticisms of the eighteenth century to this study is indeed evident, since in them we see the beginnings of the later theories that developed.

In 1736 a book entitled *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare*, was published. This work, which has been attributed to Thomas Hanmer, was probably the first criticism of consequence regarding Hamlet's delay. The author of this work begins with praising Hamlet by commenting on his virtuous character,
on his "Idea of Filial Piety," and on the strong grief he feels for the loss of his father. 6

Later in this work we find a specific statement asserting that Hamlet delays because of dramatic necessity. Hanmer says the following:

The Case indeed is this: Had Hamlet gone naturally to work, as we could suppose such a Prince to do in paral- lel Circumstances, there would have been an End of our Play. The Poet, therefore was obliged to delay his Hero's Revenge. 7

Thus we find the earliest assertion attributing Hamlet's delay to dramatic necessity.

In this early work by Hanmer we find the background for not only the theory of dramatic necessity, but also the idea that Hamlet's delay is a mystery because the play is poorly constructed. Although he states definitely that Hamlet delays because of dramatic necessity, he says also that Shakespeare did not give Hamlet adequate cause for delay. In criticizing the play, Hanmer says the following:

Shakespeare makes the young Prince feign himself mad. I cannot but think this to be injudicious; for so far from securing himself from any Violence which he fear'd from the Usurper, which was his Design in so doing, it seems to have been the most likely Way of getting himself confin'd, and consequently, debarr'd from an Opportunity of Revenging his Father's Death, which now seem'd to be his only Aim; and accordingly it was the Occasion of his being sent away to England. Which Design, had it taken effect upon his Life, he never could have revenged his Father's Murder. To speak Truth, our Poet, by keeping too close

6Sir Thomas Hanmer, Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare, p. 16.
7Tbid., p. 34.
to the Ground-work of his Plot, has fallen into Absurdity; for there appears no Reason at all in Nature, why the young Prince did not put the Usurper to Death as soon as possible, especially as Hamlet is represented as a Youth so brave, and so careless of his own Life. 

A few years later Samuel Johnson writes in a rather derogatory manner of Shakespeare's craftsmanship. As for Hamlet's madness, Johnson says the following: "Of the feigned madness of Hamlet, there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity." In speaking of the Ghost's demand for revenge, Johnson says,

The poet is accused of having shown little regard to poetical justice, and may be charged with equal neglect of poetical probability. The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose; the revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him that was required to take it; and the gratification which would arise from the destruction of an usurper and a murderer is abated by the untimely death of Oph., the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious.

Hence we see that Johnson as well as Hanmer attacked Shakespeare's art, attributing the mystery regarding Hamlet's delay to poor craftsmanship on the part of the author.

In 1780 Henry Mackenzie wrote for The Mirror an essay in which he explained Shakespeare's failure to include specific obstacles that prevented Hamlet's immediate execution of the commands of the Ghost on the grounds that such a construction

8Ibid., p. 33.

9Shakespeare, Hamlet, op. cit., p. 145.

10Ibid., p. 146.
would make the audience be in a state of anxiety for the event, not for the person. Mackenzie says,

As it is, we feel not only the virtues, but the weaknesses, of Hamlet as our own; we see a man, who in other circumstances would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct. Our compassion for the first and our anxiety for the latter, are excited in the strongest manner; and hence arises that indescribable charm in Hamlet which attracts every reader and every spectator, which the more perfect characters of other tragedies never dispose us to feel.

Shakespeare, then, according to Mackenzie, has placed a virtuous, noble, and sensitive character into a situation with which he is unable to cope.

In 1784 Richardson in Essays on Some of Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters echoed Mackenzie's sentiments regarding Hamlet, saying that the prince delays because of an internal weakness. Richardson says the following of Hamlet:

His amiable hesitations and reluctant scruples lead him at one time to indecision; and then betray him, but the self-condemning consciousness of such apparent imbecility, into acts of rash and inconsiderate violence. Meantime, his adversaries, suffering no such internal conflict, persist with uniform determined vigor in the prosecution of unlawful schemes. Thus Hamlet, and persons of his constitution, contending with less virtuous opponents, can have little hope of success; and so the poet has not in the catastrophe been guilty of any departure from nature, or any infringement of poetical justice. We love, we almost revere, the character of Hamlet, and grieve for his sufferings. But we must at the same time confer, that his weaknesses, amiable weaknesses are the cause of his disappointment and early death.

\[11\] Ibid., p. 148.

\[12\] Ibid., p. 151.
These statements by Mackenzie and Richardson bear striking
resemblances to those emitted by Goethe a few years later.

In 1778 Steevens initiated a somewhat different attitude
toward Hamlet. After pointing out that Hamlet makes no effort
to obey the commands of the Ghost except when he mistakes
Polonius for the King, he proceeds to say that Hamlet is
guilty of unheroic acts. Hamlet's lack of concern for the
murder of Polonius, his action toward Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern, his attitude toward Ophelia, and his insults to
the King are all exemplificative not of a hero, but of a des-
picable person. Steevens never states definitely his ideas
concerning the reason for Hamlet's delay; he intimates his
opinion, however, when he mentions Dr. Akinside's observation
that perhaps Hamlet's intellect is impaired by the death of
his father, by the loss of expected sovereignty, and by his
mother's hasty, incestuous marriage. Steevens seems to
believe, then, that Hamlet delays because he is mentally ill.
This theory bears a strong resemblance to the one later pro-
posed by the twentieth-century critic A. C. Bradley.

In sharp contrast to the above theories attributing
Hamlet's delay to internal difficulties is the one advanced by
Ritson in Remarks, 1783. To Ritson Hamlet is a resolute
avenger kept from executing his mission by external forces.
According to this theory, if Hamlet had immediately performed

13 Ibid., p. 147.
his duty, he would be deemed a murderer by the people, resulting in the detriment of his own well-being. Hamlet must, therefore, produce evidence that the King is guilty of fratricide before he can execute his duty; hence we have the delay.\footnote{Ibid., p. 148.}

We now see that in the eighteenth century there was a diversity of opinions regarding the reason for Hamlet's delay. In these diverse views we find early versions of theories that were later to be developed. In Hamner we see an early interpretation of the theory of dramatic necessity, which was later expatiated upon more fully by Stoll; Johnson's comment on Shakespeare's structural weaknesses is a forerunner of the later writing of T. S. Eliot; Mackenzie and Richardson are predecessors of the sentimental theory, later expanded by Goethe; the ideas of Steevens are similar to those held by Bradley; in Ritson we find the theory of external difficulties that was later developed by Werder. The criticisms of the eighteenth century, then, were indeed significant in laying the foundation for the later theories regarding Hamlet's delay.
CHAPTER III

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISMS

During the eighteenth century the criticisms of Hamlet presented logical, practical, concrete explanations for Hamlet's delay, the principal trends being to explain this enigma as being caused by dramatic necessity or by Shakespeare's poor craftsmanship. Not until the last quarter of the eighteenth century was Hamlet's character given any consideration as offering a possible solution for his delay. The explanations advanced by Mackenzie, Richardson, and Steevens were of a different nature from the earlier criticisms in that they attributed Hamlet's delay to internal conditions within Hamlet. These views were anticipatory of the discussions which followed in the early part of the nineteenth century, and hence were anticipatory of the romantic movement.

Romanticism was prevalent in the Hamlet criticisms of the early nineteenth century. Since romanticism emphasizes the emotions and the imagination of man, the early nineteenth-century criticisms of the character of Hamlet observed his inner nature, explaining problems within him as the reason for his delay. These critics began looking upon Hamlet and the other plays of Shakespeare not as creations for stage
production, but as writings to be studied in one's library. In studying the writings of the early nineteenth-century critics, one should remember that romanticism was a prevailing current and that it exerted a great influence upon the criticisms of this century.

A novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, published in 1795, was the first work of the nineteenth century to influence other thinking on Hamlet's delay to any considerable extent. In this work not Goethe, but the protagonist of the novel, Wilhelm Meister, expresses his ideas about the character of Hamlet. As a recent critic has pointed out, however, the Hamlet criticism in this novel is not necessarily the view of Goethe himself, since Wilhelm Meister, an actor, is always stating directly these ideas. Whether the views expressed in this novel are really those of Goethe, or merely of Wilhelm Meister, is a question of irrelevance to this study, our main concern being with the content of the views and the influence they exerted upon other writings.

In speaking of Hamlet, Wilhelm Meister says, "The hero is endowed more properly with sentiments than with a character;"

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1Conklin, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

it is events alone that push him on."3 Earlier in the novel Meister describes Hamlet as a tender, inexperienced, and noble prince who is thrown into a state of despair after his father's death and his mother's remarriage. Hamlet is described as feeling orphaned.4 To this person the Ghost appears and demands revenge. Meister says,

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 piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oak-tree 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 which 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.5

3Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre, p. 313.
4Ibid., p. 248.
5Ibid., pp. 248-249.
Thus, according to Meister, the Ghost asks Hamlet to perform a duty so far beyond his capacities that the immediate execution of the act is impossible. Hamlet delays, therefore, because of an internal weakness, which is not scorned by Wilhelm Meister, but idealized. Through reading Meister's words, we feel pity for Hamlet, who, like all other human beings, has weaknesses. Because of the sentiments which Meister has attributed to Hamlet and because of the idealization of the weakness, this view expressed by Goethe through Wilhelm Meister is known as the sentimental theory.

Wilhelm Meister was read widely throughout Germany and England during the years immediately following its publication; consequently, Goethe's explanation of Hamlet's delay was well known, so well known, in fact, that it is now impossible to ascertain the extent to which this novel influenced other criticisms of the delay theme. We do know, however, from the frequent mentionings of Goethe and of Wilhelm Meister in the writings of other nineteenth-century critics that the influence Goethe exerted was extensive.

In 1809, fourteen years after the publication of Wilhelm Meister, August Wilhelm Schlegel published Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature. In this book Schlegel's discussion of Hamlet indicates clearly that he was familiar with Goethe's criticism and that he agreed to a considerable extent with Goethe. Schlegel says,
With respect to Hamlet's character: I cannot, as I do understand the poet's views, pronounce altogether so favourable a sentence upon it as Goethe does. He is, it is true, of a highly cultivated mind, a prince of royal manners, endowed with the finest sense of propriety, susceptible of noble ambition, and open in the highest degree to an enthusiastic admiration of that excellence of others of which he himself is deficient. He acts the part of madness with unrivalled power, convincing the persons who are sent to examine into his supposed loss of reason, merely by telling them unwelcome truths, and rallying them with the most caustic wit. But in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his 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 towards himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination.

Schlegel, then, agrees with Goethe that Hamlet delays because a deed too great for the prince is demanded of him; Schlegel is not so sympathetic with Hamlet as is Goethe, however, since he censures Hamlet for his weakness. To Schlegel Hamlet was not a noble, lovable, tender prince with only human weaknesses, but a weakling whom we should not admire.

Agreeing with Schlegel that Hamlet is not admirable was Tieck, who says in Dramaturgische Blatter, 1824, that Hamlet is definitely not a hero. Tieck says that Hamlet is so weak, so despicable that it is remarkable his friends do not turn away from him in disgust.

6August Wilhelm Schlegel, Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, p. 405.

7Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 288.
Forty-two years later, in 1866, Taine in his *Histoire de la Litterature Anglaise* asserted his convictions as to the reason for Hamlet's delay, his views being quite similar to those initiated by Goethe. In describing Hamlet, he echoes Goethe in saying,

Hamlet has a delicate soul, an impassioned imagination, like that of Shakespeare. He has lived hitherto, occupied in noble studies, skillful in mental and bodily exercises, with a taste for art, loved by the noblest father, enamored of the purest and most charming girl, confiding, generous, not yet having perceived, from the height of the throne to which he was born, aught but the beauty, happiness, grandeur of nature and humanity. On this soul, whose character and training make more sensitive than others, misfortune suddenly falls, extreme, overwhelming, of the very kind to destroy all faith and every motive for action.\(^8\)

Taine moves from the school of thought initiated by Goethe, however, and proceeds to follow the Coleridgian school, thereby combining the sentimental theory of Goethe with the reflective theory of Coleridge. Taine says that Hamlet lacks rational action; he can act only when he has a sudden inspiration, an idea which he cannot contemplate. Hamlet's imagination and thoughts have control of him; he is, therefore, not master of his acts.\(^9\) According to Taine, then, we see before the play opens the prince described by Goethe.

Taine combines the theories of Goethe and Coleridge, however, in explaining the immediate reason for Hamlet's delay. To Taine, Hamlet is a tender, young, meditative prince who is

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\(^9\)Ibid., p. 392.
not master of himself; he lacks rational action and hence delays because his imagination and thinking have control over him.

In the same year that Taine published *Histoire de la Litterature Anglaise*, 1866, E. W. Sievers in *William Shakespeare, Sein Leiben und Dichten* advanced his ideas concerning the reason for Hamlet's delay. Agreeing with Goethe, he says,

Hamlet is indeed a costly vase full of flowers, for he is a pure human being, penetrated by enthusiasm for the Great and the Beautiful, living wholly in the Ideal, and, above all things, full faith in man; and the vase is shivered into atoms from within.¹⁰

He disagrees with Goethe in "what causes the ruin of the vase." Sievers says that Hamlet is stunned by the corruption that has grown up around him. Hamlet, according to this account, has found man to be false; he has discovered a contradiction between the ideal world, which he believed to exist before his father's murder, and the real world, in which he lives during the action of the play. He no longer believes in the good in man. Hamlet, then, has fallen into an abnormal mental condition because he has lost faith in an ideal world in which perfection exists; he delays because of this mental condition.¹¹

¹⁰ *Shakespeare, op. cit.*, p. 322.

In 1899 in History of English Dramatic Literature Ward said the following:

It is as if Hamlet were pausing, not before the deed which he is in reality hesitating to perform—and which is neither a great nor a difficult one—but before action in general. This one necessity proves too heavy for Hamlet to bear; the acorn—to use Goethe's simile—bursts the vessel in which it has been planted; and Hamlet succumbs beneath the fardel which is imposed on all humanity.

Ward, then, contributed little to the matter, but merely reasserted the idea already expressed by Goethe.

Thus we see that Goethe and his followers believed that Hamlet, having been nurtured as a delicate and tender prince, is not prepared for the world in which he finds himself; he finds it impossible to act in the harsh world of reality. His weak character keeps him from meeting the situations of real life. In the eighteenth century Mackenzie and Richardson advanced views attributing Hamlet's delay to an internal weakness, but these views were not expatiated on to any considerable extent, nor did they exert so much influence as the criticism of Goethe did. The advocates of the sentimental theory who followed Goethe agreed, more or less, that Hamlet delays because of an internal weakness. Some of the critics describe Hamlet as a lovable, ideal prince; others describe him as being weak and despicable. Despite this divergence, however, these views all attribute Hamlet's delay

to an internal weakness within Hamlet, himself; hence, all these views belong together as integral parts of the sentimental theory.

A few years after Goethe's initiation of the sentimental theory, Samuel Taylor Coleridge presented a theory that attributed Hamlet's delay to a condition within himself, but not to his being incapable of performing the deed. Coleridge says that in viewing Hamlet's mind, and hence his delay, we must first of all consider human minds in general. He says,

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 powers of action. . . . 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 colour 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 Shakspere 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 energy of resolve.13

Coleridge, then, presents Hamlet as a person whose reflective nature will not allow premeditated action. In Seven Lectures

13Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Notes and Lectures upon Shakspere, pp. 343-344.
on Shakespeare and Milton, 1812, he expresses himself quite clearly in the following words:

He 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 beheld external things in the same way that a man of vivid imagination, who shuts his eyes, sees what has previously made an impression on his organs. The poet places him in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in. . . . What is the effect upon the son? -- instant action and pursuit of revenge? No: endless reasoning and hesitating, constant urging and solicitation of the mind to act, and as constant an escape from action; ceaseless reproaches of himself for sloth and negligence, while the whole energy of his resolution evaporates in these reproaches. 14

Coleridge saw in Hamlet a prince who is unable to change from the world of thought to the world of action. He is capable of acting only when he does not have time to ponder his movements. This theory contends that Hamlet's delay is caused by the ruin of his soul, which is in turn caused by overcultivation of the mind. In the light of this belief Hamlet's view of the external world is comparatively dim.

Following Coleridge was his son, Hartley Coleridge, who, after refuting Goethe's theory, describes Hamlet as an inveterate dweller with his own thoughts, who prefers the possible, the ideal to the real. Being naturally more a thinker than a doer, he ponders upon the ideal until the actualities of life become dim. His father's death, his mother's hasty remarriage, and his disgust with himself tend to increase his

14Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 141.
separation from the real world. Occasionally, however, Hamlet is capable of unpremeditated action. These bursts of energy account for his ability to stab Polonius and the King. Normally, however, according to Hartley Coleridge, Hamlet is a dreamer, a person lost in thought.

Holding a view similar to that of Coleridge and his son as to the reason for Hamlet's delay was William Hazlitt. In *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, 1817, he describes Hamlet as a person whose ruling passion is to think, not to act. He says the following of Hamlet:

He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again, where he alters the letters which Rosencraus and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death. At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act that has no relish of salvation in it. The view presented by Hazlitt, then, is almost identical to the one presented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and later by his son, Hartley Coleridge.

16 Ibid., p. 592.
17 William Hazlitt, Characters of Shakespear's Plays, p. 68.
18 Ibid., p. 66.
During the following years of the nineteenth century the theory first expressed by Coleridge was discussed to a considerable extent, it being the most popular of the theories explaining Hamlet's delay. In 1844 in *Cyclus Dramatischer Charakters* Roetscher said of Hamlet,

> For in him is individualised nothing less than the fault of the theorising consciousness, which is unable to resolve upon acting, unable to pass from the broad expanse of thought to the narrow and self-confining path of action, because it is lost in the boundlessness of reflection, and only wills to act when thought has become entirely clear, i.e. when it is assured of the absolute purity of its action and of all the consequences thereof. It is thus doomed to inaction.\(^{19}\)

Thus in the discussion of Roetscher we see Hamlet delaying because he is waiting until his thoughts clear; no mention is made of unpremeditated action as is found in the writings of Coleridge and Hazlitt.

Somewhat later, 1858-1860, Kreyssig in *Lectures on Shakespeare* described Hamlet as a victim of over-developed intelligence and education. Hamlet delays because he cannot make up his mind and because he is the victim of fantasies and philosophical doubts.\(^{20}\)

In 1861 in *Kratische Gänge* Vischer said, "Thinking alone never leads to action; there is no bridge from it to the

\(^{19}\)Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

fulfillment of the thought."  

A person like Hamlet will, after his thinking is completed, wait for the appropriate moment, the trouble with a person of this nature being that he is unable to determine the right moment; he waits endlessly for the proper moment, thinking erroneously that he will recognize it when it comes.  

In 1881 Salvini Tommaso presented a view similar to that of Coleridge and the other critics of the reflective school. After describing Hamlet as a troubled, disillusioned soul which is "contained within a delicate body, dominated by a lymphatic-nervous temperament," he says that this young prince delays because his excessive thought produces doubt, and hence inaction. This view is different from the one proposed by Coleridge only in the description of Hamlet's delicate body and lymphatic-nervous temperament.  

In the immediately following years there were multitudinous discussions attributing Hamlet's delay to his reflective nature. Among these criticisms were Chasles, Etudes Contemporaine, 1867; Oehlmann, Die Gemutheseite des Hamlet-Charakters, 1868; Lowell, Shakespeare Once More, 1868; Stapfer, Shakespeare et l'antiquite, 1882; and Grimm, Hamlet, 1875. These discussions, in spite of their length and number,

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21 Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 310.
22 Ibid.
23 Salvini Tommaso, "Impressions of Some Shakespearean Characters," Century Magazine, XXIII (1881), p. 120.
24 Ibid.
contributed nothing new to the problem; they merely reiterated the view asserted by Coleridge.

Following the theories initiated by Goethe and by Coleridge was one which seems to be a combination of the two. Among the advocates of this theory was Dowden, who in Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, 1875, says that Hamlet is stunned by the moral confusion in which he finds the world. His idealism has been shattered; he becomes meditative and melancholy over his discovery. To kill Claudius would be but to eradicate a single weed. Hamlet, therefore, thinks instead of acting. Dowden goes further to say that during the lifetime of the elder Hamlet the meditative prince had no need to act; now that action is exigent, he finds his reflective nature and his shattered idealism preventing him from acting. According to Dowden, then, Hamlet delays because he is stunned by the mass of corruption about him.

Also saying that Hamlet is dismayed by the condition of the world is an anonymous article in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine. This article says that the wrong lamented by Hamlet has already been performed; the damage is too great ever to be mended. What Hamlet desires is not revenge, but a re-creation, a return to life as it existed before his father's death.

26 Ibid., p. 117.
27 "Hamlet," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, CXXV (April, 1876), 466.
Of a nature similar to the theories attributing Hamlet's delay to an internal weakness, to Hamlet's reflective nature, and to his being stunned by the wrong about him is the conscience theory, which seems to believe that Hamlet ponders over whether an execution of the commands of the Ghost is morally right. This theory is perhaps a forerunner of the twentieth-century theory which contends that Hamlet is caught between two worlds—the medieval, which demands revenge, and the modern, which condemns revenge as wrong.

The progenitor of this theory was an anonymous article published in Quarterly Review in 1847. This article refutes the reflective theory, which contends that Hamlet is unable to control his actions because his thoughts have control over him, on the grounds that Hamlet does control his passion for Ophelia and that he controls himself at the death of Polonius. Such actions as these indicate clearly that Hamlet is resolute.28 This article points out Hamlet's words

Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event

as holding the explanation for Hamlet's delay. The cause for Hamlet's delay is his conscience, his moral scruples. The article says, further, "His hatred to his uncle, who has disgraced his family and disappointed his ambition, gives him personal inducements to revenge, which further blunt his

28"Recent Editions of Shakespeare," Quarterly Review, LXXIX (1847), 334.
purpose by leading him to doubt the purity of his motive.\textsuperscript{29}
Thus, according to this account, Hamlet delays not because he is an idle dreamer, but because he doubts the propriety of revenge and his own motives.

In the following year, 1848, Hudson in \textit{Lectures on Shakespeare} expressed a belief similar to the one expressed by the article in \textit{Quarterly Review}. Hudson points out that it often requires more strength of will to hold still than it does to act. We should, therefore, admire Hamlet because he resists action which to him is morally wrong. Hamlet's ponderings are exemplificative of his moral nature.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, according to Hudson, Hamlet delays because he feels that killing Claudius is morally wrong.

Agreeing that Hamlet delays because of moral scruples was Ulrici, who says the following:

He cannot make up his mind to perform the task assigned to him, not because it is too great or too difficult for him, but because he does not know how to turn a mere external action into one that is internal, free, and truly moral. Hence his restless vacillation, his hesitation and procrastination, his wavering thoughts, his coming forward and retiring, the vehement self-reproach with which he would goad himself on to prompt action, without, however, being able to control time and its flight; hence the uncertainty and the contradictions in his mode of action and apparently also in his character.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29}\emph{Ibid.}, p. 335.

\textsuperscript{30}\emph{Shakespeare, op. cit.}, p. 171.

In 1860 Mezieres in *Shakespeare, ses Œuvres et ses Critiques* says of Hamlet, "He does not strike, because he fears to commit a murder, and because his generous heart disdains an assassination." Mezieres is merely reiterating the earlier writings of Hudson, Ulrici, and the article in *Quarterly Review*.

The nineteenth-century theories viewed thus far have all contained certain similarities, the one common characteristic being that they all attribute Hamlet's delay to internal reasons. Of a nature quite different from these views is a theory ascribing Hamlet's delay to external difficulties.

One of the earliest advocates of this theory, Ziegler, said in 1803 in *Hamlet's Character* that Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because he is constantly watched by bodyguards. If Hamlet were the leader of an army, he would have no trouble fulfilling his promise to the Ghost.

This theory did not receive full recognition until Klein expatiated on it in 1846 in *Berliner Modenspiegel*. After ridiculing previous theories explaining Hamlet's delay, he says that it is impossible for Hamlet to prove the words of the Ghost. His inability to prove the guilt of Claudius, then, and not internal problems, according to Klein, is the reason that Hamlet delays.

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Following the earlier advocates of the external difficulties theory was Karl Werder, the first critic to discuss this idea fully. Werder says that according to the school of thought initiated by Goethe, Hamlet is expected to call the court and people together, and, after justifying the deed to them, take possession of the throne. Werder points out, however, that it would be difficult to justify the slaying of Claudius to the people. He says,

How is Hamlet to justify his deed to the subjects of the murdered sovereign? He can do it only by citing the communication of an apparition that had charged the King with the murder of his brother. That is clearly too much to demand of Hamlet. It is degrading to the intelligence of the Danish people to suppose, for one instant, that they would have believed the story.

Hamlet, as Werder points out, was the only one who heard the words of the Ghost. He could certainly not justify his killing of Claudius upon what he alone had heard. Werder says further,

Suppose that Hamlet had killed the King and thus deprived him of the fruits of the murder, or had lost his own life by the action; or suppose that the Danes could have been so insane as to place him upon the throne after he had murdered the King; would revenge in the true tragical sense be satisfied? To a tragical revenge punishment is necessary, but this punishment must be justified and vindicated before the world. Therefore Hamlet does not aim at the crown nor is it his first duty to kill the King; but his task is justly

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36 Ibid., p. 44.
37 Ibid., p. 45.
to punish the murderer of his father, unassailable as that murderer now appears in the eyes of the world, and to satisfy the Danes of the righteousness of his action. That is Hamlet's task. 38

Werder believed, then, that if Hamlet immediately slew Claudius, he would be arrested, deemed a murderer, and executed; Hamlet, therefore, has to wait until he has proof of Claudius's guilt before he can kill him.

Werder's essay on Hamlet was first translated into English by Furness in his Variorum edition of Hamlet. After reading this translation of the essay, Hudson agreed to a great extent with this view. 39 Reiterating the view already expressed by Klein and Werder, he says that Hamlet is called upon to revenge a crime that can be proved only by Claudius. 40 If Hamlet killed Claudius, he would be murdering the proof; Hamlet, therefore, cannot kill Claudius until he has proof of his crime. Hudson says,

That he does thus hold himself back from the deed to which his burning passion for justice and his righteous thirst of vengeance are continually urging him, -- in all this I must still think he displays an almost super-human degree of that very thing which he is alleged to be without. 41

A few years later, in 1879, J. O. Halliwell-Phillips in Memoranda on the Tragedy of Hamlet gave a compact, complete

38 Ibid., p. 54.

39 Henry N. Hudson, Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters, p. 266.

40 Ibid., p. 280.

41 Ibid., p. 281.
statement containing the beliefs of the external-difficulties theory. He says,

There was no available practical evidence of the crime to be avenged, and if Hamlet had slain the King before the guilt of the latter had been publicly determined, he would have appeared before the nation as a vulgar assassin who had murdered his mother's husband with the selfish object of ascending the throne. Conscious that his own single belief in the accuracy of the supernatural revelation could not satisfy that public opinion to which he is so nervously sensitive, there is ever a struggle between resentment and consciousness with a fear lest the former may be victorious.42

Holding a view that combines several of the views of the nineteenth century was Charles Lamb, who said that the King was constantly surrounded by guards, thus making it difficult for Hamlet to fulfill the commands of the Ghost. Lamb says,

Besides, the very circumstance that the usurper was his mother's husband filled him with some remorse and still blunted the edge of his purpose. The mere act of putting a fellow-creature to death was in itself odious and terrible to a disposition naturally so gentle as Hamlet's was. His very melancholy, and the dejection of spirits he had so long been in, produced an irresoluteness and wavering of purpose which kept him from proceeding to extremities. Moreover, he could not help having some scruples upon his mind, whether the spirit which he had seen was indeed his father, or whether it might not be the devil, who he had heard has power to take any form he pleases, and who might have assumed his father's shape only to take advantage of his weakness and his melancholy, to drive him to the doing of so desperate an act as murder. And he determined that he would have more certain grounds to go upon than a vision or apparition, which might be a delusion.43

Lamb, then, combined several of the theories of the nineteenth

42J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, Memoranda on the Tragedy of Hamlet, pp. 73-74.

43Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb, Tales from Shakespeare, p. 313.
century and anticipated some of the theories that were not to be discussed fully until the twentieth century.

During the nineteenth century there were advanced several minor theories that had little, if any, bearing upon the thinking of other critics. Among these was Herder, who says in *Literatur und Kunst*, 1800, that Shakespeare does not have Hamlet kill the King early in the play because such an action would prevent Shakespeare from leading us into the very soul of Hamlet. According to Herder, then, Hamlet delays so that Shakespeare can be enabled to show us Hamlet's inner self.\(^4^4\)

In 1827 in *Ueber Shakespeare's Hamlet und Seine Beurtheiler* Goethe, A. W. Schlegel, und Tieck Hermes presented a unique view. He says,

He is not precipitate, because conscious of his worth, he does not despair of the result. He does not overestimate himself, and attribute this result to himself, but he confides in a higher guidance, --without knowing that he has it in his own breast, --he trusts to the hand of the Highest, by which that will happen that must. Only in moments of depression, when the flame of passion blazes wildly in him, does his revenge seem to lag, only then does he reproach himself that his thoughts are not bloody enough. But is this hesitation dodging, skulking? Does he on this account ever lose sight of his purpose?\(^4^5\)

Victor Hugo in 1864 in *William Shakespeare* said that Hamlet feigns madness because during the Middle Ages and earlier it was a state crime to know that the King was an assassin.\(^4^6\)

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\(^4^4\)Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

\(^4^5\)[*Tbid.*], p. 289.

Since Hamlet is not convinced by the words of the Ghost, he hesitates and does not know what to do. The tragedy is, therefore, one of doubt.\footnote{Ibid., p. 237.}

Of an entirely different view was Blake, who asserts that Hamlet is fat. This obesity in turn renders him physically incapable of acting, since fatness about the heart is a condition discouraging action. Blake, then, says that Hamlet delays because of a condition within himself, but that that condition is physical rather than mental.\footnote{E. Vale Blake, "The Impediment of Adipose—a Celebrated Case," \textit{Popular Science Monthly}, XVII (1880), 65.}

In 1890 Wilson Barrett wrote an article in which he points out that Hamlet at times does act with remarkable quickness. Immediately upon hearing Horatio's information about the Ghost, he cross-examines him thoroughly; he watches that night, the first opportunity he has; instead of lacking decision he speaks immediately to the Ghost; after the play he would have killed the King if he were not afraid of sending him to Heaven; he stabs Polonius, thinking he is the King; he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths; he is the first to board the pirate vessel. Certainly these are not the actions of a person who lacks decision and the ability to act rationally. The delay, furthermore, lasts only four months. We should bear in mind, then, according to
Barrett, that Hamlet does act and that his delay is not so great as we sometimes are led to believe.\footnote{49}

Holding an entirely different view was Crane, who says the following:

Hamlet is practically what is now the custom to call an agnostic, and his agnosticism paralyzes his will. While wasting his time in an endless round of speculations, he is oppressed by a despairing consciousness that his sworn obligation is not likely to be fulfilled, and when he at last rushed into action it is in the desperate way that defeats his own purpose.\footnote{50}

The nineteenth century, then, proved indeed fruitful in the production of explanations of Hamlet's delay. Although most of the views expressed during this century had been introduced by eighteenth-century critics, the critics of the nineteenth century were the first to express these ideas fully and convincingly.

During the nineteenth century, schools of thought came into being. The schools attributing Hamlet's delay to internal causes were prevalent during this century, the major schools being the sentimental theory, the reflective theory, and the conscience theory. These theories either praise or scorn some abnormality within Hamlet.

Of a different vein was the theory of external difficulties, which pointed out that the cause for the delay


was not to be found within Hamlet himself, but without, in the reactions the people of Denmark would have if he killed Claudius.

The theories of the nineteenth century, then, were quite varied and numerous. Without these criticisms the twentieth-century discussions could not have been so full, so numerous, and so diverse as they are. The nineteenth-century theories were of the utmost importance in laying the foundation for the theories of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER IV

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

As the nineteenth century came to a close and the twentieth century began, the nature of Hamlet criticism experienced little, if any, change. These criticisms in the twentieth century continued, generally, to follow a few distinct schools of thought. Although most of these theories appear to be new to the twentieth century, they actually owe their origins to the earlier reasonings of the nineteenth century. Today very few scholars profess to believe in the ideas of Goethe, Coleridge, or of the other nineteenth-century critics; instead, they advance theories which are outgrowths of the nineteenth-century criticisms.

The twentieth century has witnessed a marked increase in the amount of critical material written about the character of Hamlet. During the first half of the twentieth century more was written about this character than had been written during the entire nineteenth century. Despite the mass of criticism, however, no one has been able to produce an explanation of Hamlet's delay that is acceptable to a large number of other scholars. If someone should produce such an explanation, Hamlet would probably cease to be discussed and eventually to be read on a wide scale. The play has been,
however, and probably always will be kept alive by the
diversity of opinions about Hamlet, whether these ideas be
initiated by high-school students or by scholars who have
devoted their lives to the study of Shakespeare.

One of the earliest critics of the twentieth century,
A. C. Bradley, in Shakespearean Tragedy, 1904, gives a detailed
discussion of Hamlet's delay. In this discussion, after
viewing and refuting the major views of the nineteenth century,
Bradley advances his own theory.

Beginning with the theory of external difficulties,
Bradley says that this idea could hardly account for Hamlet's
delay for a number of reasons. The first objection Bradley
makes to this theory is that Hamlet never mentions external
problems; it is inconceivable that Shakespeare would have
these difficulties without mentioning them definitely. Second,
Hamlet always assumes that he can obey the Ghost. Bradley
gives the following instance: "When he spares the King, he
speaks of killing him when he is drunk asleep, when he is in
his rage, when he is awake in bed, when he is gaming, as if
there were in none of these cases the least obstacle." ¹
Bradley's third point is that if Laertes can raise the people
against the King, Hamlet, who is loved by the people, could
easily do the same. Fourth, Hamlet stages the play to expose
Claudius's guilt, not to the court, but to Hamlet himself.

¹A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 95.
Lastly, Hamlet never mentions bringing the King to public justice. He always speaks of killing the King by himself. Bradley, then, firmly rejects the theory of external difficulties.

Bradley is more sympathetic with the theories attributing Hamlet's delay to internal causes than he is with the external difficulties theory, although he believes that the internal theories have their weakness in their isolation of one element and giving it as the entire reason for the delay.

In refuting the conscience theory, Bradley says that there is nothing to prove that Hamlet delays because of moral scruples; in fact, he says that Hamlet never doubts that he should avenge his father's death. As to the subtler theory that Hamlet is not conscious of his moral scruples and that he is living in a world too primitive for his moral ideals, Bradley says that there is nothing to support this view fully until the last act; he then questions the idea that Shakespeare would wait until then to present such a meaning. Bradley attacks this theory further on the grounds that Hamlet refrains from killing the King at prayer because he wants to send the murderer to hell, not to heaven. Finally Bradley doubts that the Ghost would demand of Hamlet an act that the son should not bring about. Surely we should believe that

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2 Ibid., pp. 95-96.
3 Ibid., p. 97.
4 Ibid.
Hamlet ought to have obeyed the Ghost. Bradley, although he says that the conscience theory does not fully explain the delay, agrees that Hamlet is of a moral nature and that moral scruples may in a small part account for the delay.

Bradley looks upon the sentimental theory of Goethe with less respect than he does the conscience theory. Of the sentimental theory Bradley says,

The 'conscience' theory at any rate leaves Hamlet a great nature which you can admire and even revere. But for the 'sentimental' Hamlet you can feel only pity not unmixed with contempt. Whatever else he is, he is no hero.

He further asks what resemblance there is between this sentimental Hamlet and the Hamlet who fights off his friends and follows the Ghost, between this Hamlet and the Hamlet who scarcely once speaks to the King without an insult, or to Polonius without a gibe; the Hamlet who storms at Ophelia and speaks daggers to his mother; the Hamlet who, hearing a cry behind the arras, whips out his sword in an instant and runs the eavesdropper through; the Hamlet who sends his 'school-fellows' to their death and never troubles his head about them more; the Hamlet who is the first man to board a pirate ship, and who fights with Laertes in the grave; the Hamlet of the catastrophe, an omnipotent fate, before whom all the court stands helpless, who, as the truth breaks upon him, rushes on the King, drives his foil right through his body, then seizes the poisoned cup and forces it violently between the wretched man's lips, and in the throes of death has force and fire enough to wrest the cup from Horatio's hand ('By heaven, I'll have it!') lest he should drink and die?

Bradley truly believes that this theory could not explain

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5Ibid., p. 100.  
6Ibid., p. 101.  
7Ibid., p. 102.  
8Ibid.
Hamlet's delay, since it turns tragedy into pathos and since it makes of Hamlet not a hero but a weakling.

With the remaining nineteenth-century view, the reflective theory of Coleridge, Bradley is more sympathetic than he is with the other views. Bradley, however, says that this theory does not adequately present the Hamlet that Shakespeare must have intended; in fact, it creates an inferior being whom we cannot admire so much as we should a Shakespearean hero. This theory, according to Bradley, contends that under any circumstances and at any time Hamlet would behave the same. Judging from the play, however, Bradley says that Hamlet must have been a person of action at times. This theory, then, is not adequate in its explanation of Hamlet's delay.

After thus refuting the existing views explaining the delay, Bradley asserts that before the opening of the play Hamlet must have been a man of action, a soldier. Bradley says,

And, finally, he must have been quick and impetuous in action; for it is downright impossible that the man we see rushing after the Ghost, killing Polonius, dealing with the King's commission on the ship, boarding the pirate, leaping into the grave, executing his final vengeance, could ever have been shrinking or slow in an emergency. Imagine Coleridge doing any of these things!

Bradley believes that after the death of the elder Hamlet the

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9Ibid., p. 103.
10Ibid., p. 107.
11Ibid., p. 109.
young prince fell into a state of melancholia, a state in which one is disgusted with life, meditative, and averse to any kind of action. Furthermore, the task required of Hamlet would be difficult in nature were he in a normal state.\textsuperscript{12} According to Bradley's theory, then, Hamlet is afflicted with melancholia, which is not madness, but which approaches it. At times he is able to arouse himself out of this state and be resolute and effective, but he is usually ineffective.

Echoing the theory laid down by Bradley is J. Dover Wilson, who expresses his idea regarding the delay in \textit{What Happens in Hamlet}, 1935. Wilson says,

He does not say what he will do; he does not know what he will do; he merely delights in the thought of doing something. On the other hand, his inactivity, his inability to perform that on which his mind is set, that which he wills, corresponds with the emotional state in which he seems drained of blood, devoid of all desires save the desire of death, and even unable to accomplish that. At such times, as he tells us himself, he is "dull and muddy-mettled." The procrastination and the melancholy are all of a piece.\textsuperscript{13}

Wilson, then, echoes Bradley in attributing the delay to Hamlet's state of melancholia. He further says that Shakespeare evidently was familiar with melancholia and that he had probably read \textit{A Treatise on Melancholy}, 1586, by Timothy Bright.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 122.

\textsuperscript{13}J. Dover Wilson, \textit{What Happens in Hamlet}, p. 226.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 227.
Contributing to Bradley's view with a Coleridgian explanation for Hamlet's frequent actions, Wilson says that Hamlet is capable of unpremeditated action, such as when he kills Polonius or when he fights with Laertes in the grave.\(^{15}\) Wilson adds further to this view in saying that Hamlet at first probably doubts the Ghost.\(^{16}\) The assertions of Wilson, however, are not so forceful as are those of Bradley, since he admits that Shakespeare never gives a reason for Hamlet's inaction.\(^{17}\) Wilson intimates, then, that there is no sure way of determining the cause for Hamlet's delay but that he probably delays because he is a victim of melancholia.

Also asserting that Hamlet delays because he is suffering from melancholia is A. Clutton-Brock, who says that Hamlet receives a violent nervous shock from the words of the Ghost.\(^{18}\) Although Hamlet realizes that he should execute the commands of the Ghost, the shock he has incurred makes painful any thought he has about his uncle or his mother's connection with him. This sharp pain causes him unconsciously to push from his mind all thoughts that cause him suffering. Hence, the more Hamlet tries to act, the more his unconscious self drives away his thoughts and causes him to seek excuses for

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 225.  
\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 74.  
\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 204.  
\(^{18}\)A. Clutton-Brock, Shakespeare's Hamlet, p. 44.
his inaction. Speaking further of Hamlet's melancholia, Clutton-Brock says,

In the interview with Polonius Shakespeare proves how closely he has observed melancholy, in himself or in others. Hamlet is fighting his melancholy while he trifles with Polonius; but twice he slips back into it with the irrelevant, sighed, or groaned, exclamations of a melancholic. When Polonius asks him fussily—"Will you walk out of the air, my lord?" he answers—"Into my grave?" And when Polonius says—"I will most humbly take my leave of you," he replies—"You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal; except my life, except my life, except my life." The repetition here is a symptom of mechanical falling back into a persistent state of melancholy.

Clutton-Brock, then, agrees with Bradley that Hamlet delays because he is suffering from melancholia.

Echoing the other followers of Bradley is G. Wilson Knight, who says that Hamlet delays because his will is snapped and useless, because he is suffering from melancholia. Knight says further,

Hamlet does not neglect his father's final behest—he obeys it, not wisely but only too well. Hamlet remembers—not alone his father's ghost, but all the Death of which it is a symbol. What would have been the use of killing Claudius? Would that have saved his mother's honour, have brought life to his father's mouldering body, have enabled Hamlet himself, who had so long lived in Death, to have found again childish joy in the kisses of Ophelia? Would that have altered the Universal Scheme? To Hamlet, the universe smells of mortality; and his soul is sick to death.

In 1942 Oscar Campbell echoed the earlier critics who attributed Hamlet's delay to melancholia. Campbell says that

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19 Ibid., p. 45.  
20 Ibid., p. 53.  
22 Ibid., p. 33.
Shakespeare and the Elizabethan audience were as familiar with melancholia as a modern audience is with an inferiority complex. After studying Hamlet's character and noting that the Elizabethans were quite familiar with melancholia, Campbell proceeds to attribute Hamlet's delay to the state of melancholia in which we find him. Explaining why Hamlet does not kill the King when he finds him at prayer, Campbell says,

At that moment, a mood of depression darkened Hamlet's mind—the inevitable reaction to the excitement he had just felt at the success of his play in catching the conscience of the King. His will is paralyzed. Resolute action of any sort is beyond his power. So he cannot make use of the heaven-sent opportunity to revenge his father's murder.

Campbell then describes Hamlet's malady as follows:

When Hamlet falls into the depressed phase of his malady, his mind is corroded by skepticism and pessimism. Then he feels that human life is meaningless and that the universe is a foul and pestilent congregation of vapor.

Detmold in "Hamlet's 'All But Blunted Purpose'" says virtually the same as the other followers of Bradley. He is convinced that Hamlet is a strong, vigorous, intelligent man who feels no revulsion against killing Claudius, who is required by duty to avenge his father, who is not afraid, and who finds Claudius not invulnerable. Detmold says that

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23 Oscar James Campbell, "What Is the Matter with Hamlet?" Yale Review, XXXII (December, 1942), 312.

24 Ibid., p. 316.

25 Ibid., p. 317.
such a person would delay only because he has little interest in the deed to be performed, because his mind is preoccupied with other matters. Detmold speaks further of Hamlet in the following words:

He is apparently a model of hesitation, indecision, procrastination; we seem to be witnessing an examination of the failure of his will. And yet demonstrably it has not failed, and does at odd moments stir itself violently. In no other way can we account for the timidity of his enemies, the respect of his friends, and his own frank acknowledgement that he has "cause, and will, and strength, and means" to avenge his father. And though he is a long time in killing Claudius, he does kill him at last, and he is capable of other actions which argue the rash and impulsive nature of a man with strong will.

Detmold believes that Hamlet, who at once believed in the divinity of man, is shocked into a state of melancholia by his mother's actions and by the revelation of the Ghost. Hamlet looks in despair, realizing that the damage has already been done, that it is irreparable. Detmold, then, echoes Bradley and his explanation of Hamlet's delay.

The theory initiated by Bradley has opponents as well as advocates. Draper in The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience finds Bradley's statements that Hamlet is mentally ill and that this illness is responsible for his inaction contradictory with the further statements that Hamlet is not insane.


27 Ibid., p. 25.

28 Ibid., p. 29.
and that his sudden bursts of action are caused by his illness. Draper believes that Bradley is confusing the Elizabethan meaning of the word melancholy with the twentieth-century connotation. Draper says that the Elizabethan melancholy was caused by too much black bile in the system. This melancholy was not supposed to arise from mental shock, nor did it ordinarily cause paralysis of will, inaction; in fact, it tended to lead to action. Draper says, "In short, the Elizabethan did not think of melancholy as a natural and normal cause for procrastination and weakness of will." Draper refutes Bradley's view, then, on the grounds that it is incongruous with any possible Elizabethan interpretation of the character of Hamlet.

Draper follows the conscience theory in explaining the delay. He says that Hamlet's Christian beliefs cause him not to attempt to kill the King until he is certain of the veracity of the Ghost's words. After Hamlet is assured that Claudius is guilty, he does not have a satisfactory opportunity until the end of the play.

30 Ibid., p. 176.
31 Ibid., p. 177.
32 Ibid., p. 200.
Shakespeare's Hamlet then is a perfectly integrated trinity of personalities: the first the soldier-scholar-courtier-lover of his youth, based on the Prince of the Bestrafte Brudermord, the second, the exterior personality that he showed the world, assuming a social charm or a flagrant eccentricity to the point of seeming madness; of this Hamlet also, the Bestrafte Brudermord gives evidence; but the third Hamlet is entirely Shakespeare's own, the Hamlet in revolt against the deviousness of his task; the man of action whom events have forced to pause and weigh and wait, who meanwhile sees his world falling about his ears, who strives at the very root of all he has known and lived because he has come to hate it, but who in the end achieves the one great object for which he gives all else, and by his just revenge at last brings peace to the perturbed spirit of his father: this all-too-human being, struggling and suffering first in doubtful and enforced inaction, then in a tempest of event—a single man against the whole society of his nation and his time, against his friends, his love, his mother, pursuing his inevitable goal, in sorrow and in bitterness of heart to ultimate catastrophe: such are Brutus, Macbeth, Coriolanus, and Antony; and such is Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Draper, then, is following the same ideas that were expressed during the nineteenth century.

In 1907, somewhat earlier than Draper wrote, Devlin asserted views belonging to the same school of thought as those of Draper. Considering Hamlet a Catholic prince of the eleventh century, Devlin says that the young prince doubts the propriety of revenge. Hamlet also realizes that the Ghost may be an agent sent from the Devil to tempt him. This view, then, belongs with the others that explain Hamlet's

33 Ibid., pp. 205-206.
conscience, his moral scruples, his religious nature as the reason for his delay.

In 1926 Conrad expressed similar views. In "Hamlet's Delay" he says that while the Ghost is present Hamlet is in such an emotional state that he accepts immediately and unquestionably the request of the Ghost; after the Ghost leaves and his passion cools, however, his whole nature recoils from performing such a deed. In spite of this aversion Hamlet strives valiantly to execute his promise, giving up love, life, and everything else in this world.35

Also advancing the conscience theory is Richards, who says that in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy Hamlet is not contemplating suicide, but is explaining the reason for his procrastination as his fear of the life in the hereafter if he makes a fatal mistake.36 Richards says further,

His delay, as he himself informs us, is actually occasioned by no morbid sensitiveness of temperament or weakness of will, but rather by his scrupulous regard to conscience, by his moral integrity that forbids action till all possibility of doing wrong is eliminated.37

In 1935 an anonymous article in The Nation said the following:


37Ibid., p. 758.
We suggest that Hamlet delayed because he was a man hesitating between two worlds—the medieval and the modern; because the motives which urged him to act had their origin in a medieval system of thought which his deepest self no longer accepted.  

The idea of incest was a medieval idea, and Hamlet was living in a world dominated by these medieval ideas and he supposed that he accepted them; but he was also a thinker, and his deepest thoughts were modern thoughts. In the end, custom and the weight of current opinion drove him into the catastrophe which represents the triumph of the dying world, but Hamlet seemed criminally slow, even to himself, because Hamlet was "ahead of his time." He did not delay because he was mad or because his adventures had to fill five acts. He delayed because, like all men who have got beyond the system of thought current in their time, he was able neither to act as that system of thought supposed that he should nor, by his own effort, create the intellectual atmosphere in which he could function effectively. He was hesitating between the world which was dead and the world which was powerless to be born. And like all who hesitate he was lost—except to the future.

Greg in 1936 in "What Happens in 'Hamlet'?' suggested that Hamlet is too civilized for him deliberately to plan and to execute a cold-blooded murder. Although this view attributes Hamlet's delay to his civilized ideals rather than to his moral scruples, it is truly a part of the conscience theory. Whether Hamlet is a person with moral scruples or merely a civilized human being recoiling against

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39 Ibid.

the deed required of him is irrelevant, the main factor being that both explanations consider Hamlet's sense of right and wrong, his conscience.

Bertram Joseph, one of our latest critics, says little more than the earlier advocates of the conscience theory do. He says that the Elizabethans would certainly not have attributed Hamlet's delay to his melancholia, for the Elizabethan connotation of the word melancholy would make melancholia an inadequate cause for the delay. Joseph believes that Hamlet delays because he questions the identity of the Ghost. If the Ghost were false and Hamlet killed Claudius, the young prince would have sinned and hence have secured his own damnation.41 Finally Joseph says,

So it is that the Prince, conscious of his failure to avenge his father, feels tainted with the ignobility of the beast, as if he had been guilty of the inability of an animal to remember—of "bestial oblivion." This is a reproach which Shakespeare's first audiences could understand. There was no need for them to interpret it as springing from an abnormal state of mind, from melancholy: for them right at the core of the play could be discerned a conflict between the claims of honour and the undoubted certainty that if Hamlet were to obey a devil in the shape of his father, the killing of Claudius would lead to his own damnation.42

Of a slightly different nature is the idea advanced by Lawlor, although it still belongs to the conscience theory. He says that the Elizabethan audience evidently looked upon

41 Bertram Joseph, Conscience and the King, p. 32.
42 Ibid., p. 46.
Hamlet's delay as a scruple about the justice of revenge, although Hamlet does not realize the reason for this indecision.43

We find Goddard in 1951 re-expressing in a similar form the conscience theory. He says that Shakespeare intended for us at first to believe that Hamlet should kill Claudius. According to Goddard, however, Shakespeare intended that as we experience Hamlet's agony and progress with the play, we are to change our view and to realize that revenge is wrong and that Hamlet should not perform the duty placed upon him by the Ghost.44 Praising Hamlet for resisting the Ghost and doing what is right, Goddard says "Hamlet's delay, then, instead of giving ground for condemnation, does him credit. It shows his soul is still alive and will not submit to the demands of the father without a struggle."45 Later Goddard says, "The highest duty of any man is to be true to the divinity within him, to remain faithful to his creative gift."46 Hamlet, then, should be admired for his strength in overcoming the obstacle of the Ghost and doing that which he believes to be right. Shakespeare, according to Goddard,

46 Ibid., p. 360.
intended to show through Hamlet's struggle with his conscience that revenge is wrong.

The conscience theory has indeed gained a noticeable recognition during the twentieth century. In addition to the already-mentioned twentieth-century advocates of this theory there are others, such as Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Rea, who give interesting discussions but contribute nothing new.

In 1910 Ernest Jones presented a new theory explaining Hamlet's delay. Inspired by a footnote in Traumdeutung by Freud, he made a psychoanalytical study of Hamlet. Jones believes that dramatic criticism of a character in a play is possible only when the critic considers the character as a living person; he, therefore, considers Hamlet as living.

Believing that any psychoanalytical study which does not investigate the childhood of the person being studied is useless, Jones speculates upon Hamlet's early life and his early relations with other people. When Hamlet was a child, he probably held the warmest affection for his mother,
this love even containing elements of an erotic quality. This Oedipus complex was evidently caused by two traits in the Queen's character: her passionate fondness for Hamlet and her sensual nature. Realizing that this condition is unnatural, Hamlet suppressed his feelings, casting them into his subconscious mind; he then weaned himself outwardly from his mother.\(^{52}\) Hamlet then turned to Ophelia and seemingly transferred his love to her for the reason that she was the opposite of his mother.\(^{53}\)

During Hamlet's childhood he had desired all his mother's attention and love; when his father received attention from the Queen, Hamlet wished he were dead. As Hamlet grew older, however, he suppressed this desire along with his unnatural love for his mother. When his father died and his mother remarried, these suppressed desires reappeared. Jones says,

The long "repressed" desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection is stimulated to unconscious activity by the sight of someone usurping this place exactly as he himself had once longed to do. More, this someone was a member of the same family, so that the actual usurpation further resembled the imaginary one in being incestuous. Without his being in the least aware of it these ancient desires are ringing in his mind, are once more struggling to find conscious expressions, and need such an expenditure of energy again to "repress" them that he is reduced to the deplorable mental state he himself so vividly depicts.\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\)Ibid., p. 80. 
\(^{53}\)Ibid., p. 81. 
\(^{54}\)Ibid., p. 82.
The revelation of the Ghost lets Hamlet know that Claudius has accomplished the deeds that he wished to do in his childhood. Hamlet had desired to kill his father and to take possession of his mother; now Claudius has done these things. Jones then explains Hamlet's delay in the following words:

Much as he hates him, he can never denounce him with the ardent indignation that boils straight from his blood when he reproaches his mother, for the more vigorously he denounces his uncle the more powerfully does he stimulate to activity his own unconscious and "repressed" complexes. He is therefore in a dilemma between on the one hand allowing his natural detestation of his uncle to have free play, a consummation which would stir still further his own horrible wishes, and on the other hand ignoring the imperative call for the vengeance that his obvious duty demands. His own "evil" prevents him from completely denouncing his uncle's, and in continuing to "repress" the former he must strive to ignore, to condone, and if possible even to forget the latter; his moral fate is bound up with his uncle's for good or ill. In reality his uncle incorporated the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself.

Jones, then, believes that the reason for Hamlet's delay is his Oedipus complex.

In 1907 Charlton M. Lewis initiated a theory that is different from any that existed before it. Lewis believes that in the play by Kyd, Hamlet delayed for adequate reasons, probably because the King was well guarded. Shakespeare, in developing his version of the play, retained the delay,

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55 Ibid., p. 83.  
56 Ibid., p. 88.
the result of the external difficulties, but he eliminated
the difficulties themselves. Lewis says further,

In Kyd's play the hero was kept waiting several
weeks, but his opportunity came at last. Shakespeare,
I believe, meant to tell the same story, but to present
the man's life and emotional experiences as they must
really have been during the interim. He has slighted
the obstacles, for he was not interested in them; and
they might be taken for granted. The interesting
problem was how it would feel to be in Hamlet's place.
The sensitive, affectionate, impulsive character of
Hamlet has already sprung to light in Shakespeare's
imagination, out of the pretence of madness; and the
answer to the present problem is that such a man in such
a situation would be in an almost hopeless quandary.
At times he would be all for blood, for in the best of
us such moods are not enduring, and there would be
times when Hamlet could hardly persuade himself back
into his fury if he tried. He achieves his revenge;
he achieves it, indeed, as soon as circumstances per-
mit; but that is not the point. The point is that,
looking down deep into his soul, we see him achieving
it in spite of almost infinite reluctance.

Finally, in summarizing his theory, Lewis says,

In the existing tragedy we find two distinct heroes
imperfectly melted into one. Kyd's Hamlet and Shakespeare's
Hamlet, taken separately, are comparatively simple and
intelligent persons; but the Kyd-Shakespeare compound
is a "monstr'-horrend'-inform'-ingendous" mystery,
cul lumen ademptum. Kyd's Hamlet does most of the
deeds of the play, and Shakespeare's Hamlet thinks most
of the thoughts. Kyd is responsible for most of the
plot, and Shakespeare for most of the characterization;
Kyd for the hero's actual environment, Shakespeare for
the imperfect description of his environment that has
come down to us. Thus the Kyd-Shakespeare composite
hero follows up one man's thoughts with another man's
deeds, and confronts with Shakespeare's soul a situation
of Kyd's devising.

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58 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
59 Ibid., pp. 116-117.
A few years later Robertson echoed Lewis's theory, although he was not aware of the existence of Lewis's book at the time. Robertson says that in the Kydian version of Hamlet the protagonist delays because he is alone against the powerful King, who is supported by the people. Shakespeare then retains the delay but omits the reason for it, thus increasing the complexity of the plot. We see, then, that Robertson contributed nothing that had not already been expressed by Lewis.

In 1922 Alden added to this theory. He says that the play does not present any view clearly as to the reason for Hamlet's delay and that no theory can be declared right that is not obvious to the audience, both the Elizabethan and the modern. He then says that the difficulty probably arises in Shakespeare's development of the plot of the Ur-Hamlet into his Hamlet. In suggesting two explanations for the difficulty, Alden says,

One is that Shakespeare saw the inconsistencies of Kyd's melodramatic tragedy, despaired of avoiding them without undertaking more changes than the familiarity of the story now made practicable, and set himself, with all his technical skill so to conceal them that they remained unnoticed for some two hundred years. The other, that he began the revision with only a conventional drama of crime, ghost, delay, revenge,

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60 J. M. Robertson, Hamlet Once More, p. 3.
61 J. M. Robertson, The Problem of Hamlet, p. 68.
62 Robertson, Hamlet Once More, op. cit., p. 158.
63 R. M. Alden, Shakespeare, p. 256.
in mind, but soon found his hero so strangely alluring on the subjective side that he threw his whole energy into depicting that personality, and let the details of the objective action take more or less negligent course. 64

Alden, then, echoes the earlier critics of the evolutionary theory, but he also suggests reasons for the problem that Shakespeare encountered.

In 1934 E. E. Stoll in Art and Artifice in Shakespeare advances an idea that is similar to the evolutionary theory. He says that Shakespeare had Hamlet delay because the Elizabethan audience, already familiar with the plot, would have been greatly disappointed had Shakespeare changed the story. Shakespeare was expected to improve the story only in style and meter. We know from Kyd's Spanish Tragedy, from the German Hamlet, and from the pirated first quarto of Hamlet that the lost Hamlet evidently contained the delayed action. Shakespeare, therefore, was bound by convention not to alter the plot structure of the play. 65

Had Shakespeare not been confronted with the expectations of the audience, the matter of dramatic necessity still would have remained. Had Hamlet gained his revenge in the first or second act, the play would have been ended. Shakespeare was bound by dramatic necessity to have the ghost appear at the beginning, and the tragic deed accomplished, as in all good revenge plays, at the end. Since Shakespeare had to

64 Ibid., p. 258.
65 E. E. Stoll, Art and Artifice in Shakespeare, p. 91.
have something to occur between the two actions, he contrived Hamlet's meditation and feigned madness. The matter of dramatic necessity is the true cause for Hamlet's delay.\textsuperscript{66}

Stoll says that Hamlet's meditations, feigned madness, and other actions have frequently been pointed out to indicate that Hamlet is an idle day-dreamer, lost in thought, or that he is too weak a character to carry out the commands of the ghost. Stoll attacks these theories from the standpoint that they make of Hamlet a weakling, not a hero. Shakespeare introduced Hamlet's actions not to lower him in our eyes, but to explain and justify the story. Had Shakespeare characterized Hamlet as a weakling, he would have disappointed his audience; he, therefore, kept Hamlet as he found him, only manipulating him more deftly. The audience were accustomed to the revenger's beating around the bush and reproaching himself for it. This did not lower his prestige in their eyes. We must bear in mind, also, that deeply-involved psychological conflicts were unknown to the Elizabethan audience. Character presentations were made so clearly that the audience could not help understanding them. Had one of the characters in the play considered Hamlet to be a weakling, he would definitely have mentioned his thoughts. The theory of internal difficulties, then, according to Stoll, is absurd, since Shakespeare evidently did not intend

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid.
to present a weakling, and the audience probably did not recognize Hamlet as one.  

Stoll attacks much of the modern criticism of Hamlet from the standpoint that the critics are trying to read into the play points which Shakespeare or the audience could not have possibly recognized. For two centuries nothing was written about Hamlet's delay. Stoll says, "A novel or a poem may, in its own time and after, be neglected because misunderstood; but criticism should be wary of finding this to be the case with an extraordinarily popular play by an expert playwright."  

Stoll believes, then, that Hamlet does not delay; he is a resolute avenger all the way through. References to delay are put in to bridge over gaps in action. Shakespeare wanted us to think that Hamlet is a resolute avenger. Whenever Hamlet delays, he has perfectly good reasons. The demand of dramatic necessity, then, according to Stoll, is the cause for Hamlet's delay.  

Wagenknecht echoes Stoll in saying that Hamlet's killing of the king will necessitate the conclusion of the play; this action, therefore, cannot come until the end of the last act.  

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67 Ibid., pp. 94-101.  
68 Ibid., p. 109.  
Also attributing Hamlet's delay not to the character of the protagonist, but to Shakespeare's working of the plot is T. S. Eliot. To Eliot the problem in Hamlet is a result of Shakespeare's poor workmanship. He says,

So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. . . . Hamlet, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. . . . We must simply admit that there Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle. 70

There are those critics, then, who deny the existence of the delay theme. Kittredge, one of these critics, says,

Both in Shakespeare and in Belleforest we have a story of necessarily deferred revenge, but the situation at the outset is not the same, and the ground of the necessity differs accordingly. In the old tale the murder is no secret; but the avenger is helpless, a mere boy in his uncle's power. In the drama, on the other hand, the murder is suspected by no one until the Ghost reveals it. But this is 'spectral evidence.' Hamlet believes that the apparition is indeed the ghost of his father and that it has told the truth. This doubt as to the ambiguous apparition accords with ancient doctrines and was perfectly intelligible to any Elizabethan audience. 71

He says further that Hamlet cannot act merely upon the words of the Ghost; he must have proof; Claudius must be forced to confess. Only then can Hamlet execute the commands of the Ghost. 72 Hamlet is unable to prove Claudius's guilt

71 George Lyman Kittredge (editor), Sixteen Plays of Shakespeare, p. 965.
72 Ibid., p. 966.
until after the play scene. His first opportunity to kill him after this scene is when Claudius is praying, a time in which only a cold-blooded assassin would strike; Hamlet, therefore, spares his uncle at this time. After this time no other opportunities present themselves until the end of the play. Kittredge denies, then, that Hamlet procrastinates.

Hazleton Spencer agrees with Kittredge. He says,

At the outset the Prince is depressed by his father's death, by his uncle's election to the throne, and by his mother's remarriage. Under the circumstances, his melancholy is not excessive. Not till he meets the Ghost has he the slightest inkling that his uncle has committed murder and his mother adultery. She has no knowledge of her present husband's crime, though of her innocence Hamlet is not certain till her surprise clears up when he brings the accusation just after the death of Polonius.

Hamlet must test the words of the Ghost before proceeding with his task. The first opportunity he has to secure his revenge after he is convinced of the veracity of the Ghost is when Claudius is at prayer. The revenge code required destruction of the soul as well as of the body; Hamlet, therefore, could not kill Claudius while he was praying. After the death of Polonius Hamlet has no further chance to strike until the end of the play.

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73 Ibid., p. 967. 74 Ibid., p. 969.
76 Ibid., p. 315. 77 Ibid., p. 316.
This same view is expressed by Utter, who also bears a strong similarity to the nineteenth-century critics who attribute Hamlet’s delay to external difficulties. He says, Hamlet could not have killed the King before he did. For it is not until precisely that moment when Hamlet did kill him that the King’s guilt is publicly apparent. Before that moment the King’s guilty nature is locked in secrecy; everyone regards him with the awe and homage due a monarch. . . . This, then, is Hamlet’s opportunity to kill the King without blame to himself. Had he killed him at any time before this, everyone would have looked upon Hamlet as a murderer instead of Claudius. Hamlet could never have proved Claudius’ guilt; instead, he would have been the guilty one. Nothing would have been righted in any sense of the word; instead, wrongs would have been multiplied. 78

Also echoing the external-difficulties theory is Granville-Barker, who says that Hamlet must have proof of his uncle’s guilt so that he can explain to his mother and to the rest of the world his reason for killing Claudius. 79 He says further that Claudius is constantly guarded by his courtiers and Switzers. This situation causes Hamlet considerable concern. For this reason he meditates and blames himself for inaction. He is even made unfit for the task. 80 Not until the graveyard scene is Hamlet in the proper state of mind to execute his duty; not until the last act does he have an opportunity to kill Claudius. 81

79 Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare, p. 247.
80 Ibid., p. 248.
81 Ibid., p. 250.
Platter advances similar ideas in *Hamlet's Father*, 1949. He says that even if Hamlet's father could in some way return from the dead, he would encounter the same difficulties that Hamlet does. Who would believe that he had been murdered by Claudius and not stung by a serpent?82

Explaning the actions in the play, Flatter says,

(1) The Ghost reveals what has happened and imposes on his son the duty of revenge, qualifying the task by the injunction regarding Gertrude.
(2) Hamlet first wishes to find out whether the Ghost has spoken the truth, and achieves this by means of the Mouse-trap.
(3) On account of the dual nature of the task Hamlet cannot proceed straightaway; before acting against Claudius, he seeks to ascertain his mother's share in the crime. The Ghost, by his personal intervention, prevents him from doing so.
(4) Claudius, realizing that his crime has been discovered, is now roused to activity himself; he sends Hamlet to England, to immediate death. On learning that Hamlet has returned he arranges for his assassination in his mother's presence.
(5) Hamlet, finding his father's plan unworkable, fails to do anything. Claudius's counterplan succeeds, but he is caught in his own trap. Thus, by the very failure of the hero and the very success of the villain, final victory is won: victory for the principle of justice, represented in the Ghost.83

Hankins agrees that Hamlet had no adequate opportunity to kill Claudius between the play scene and the end of the play.84 Hankins believes that the Ghost's words reveal Gertrude's guilt. He says that this revelation paralyzes Hamlet's mind to the extent that he feels a need for delay.

83 Ibid., p. 90.
time in which to face the facts more calmly and gain control of the situation. He later says,

As I see it, Hamlet recognizes the demand upon him for twofold action. He cannot merely brood over his mother's guilt but is impelled to do something about it. His problem is not the single one of shaking off his melancholy long enough to kill Claudius. Whatever action he takes must involve both of the guilty parties; it is this consideration which puzzles the will and gives him pause. It forces him to think before acting, since he must decide what to do. He also recognizes a possibility that the Ghost's accusation is false, and as the issues involved are so momentous, he must substantiate it by other evidence if he can.

These scholars, then, believe that Hamlet does not delay, that he must prove the words of the Ghost in the first of the play and that he does not have an adequate opportunity for killing Claudius after he has his proof.

All the twentieth-century explanations do not fall into one single school of thought, but combine two or more. Campbell, for example, combines the melancholy theory with the theory asserting that Hamlet doubts the identity of the Ghost. Discussing the various Elizabethan interpretations of ghosts, she says,

According to the "Papists" ghosts might be accepted as spirits of the dead permitted to return at times to earth while they were enduring purifying fires of purgatory. Or, according to King James and his fellow-believers, ghosts might be the feignings of the Devil (or even of the good angels), appearing especially to those already prepared in their souls by their desire for revenge or the fulfilment of ambition, in which case the Devil would most frequently choose the likeness

85 Ibid., p. 32.
86 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
of friends who had been dearest in order the more surely to entice his victims to their destruction. Or, according to the third group, of physicians and seekers for natural causes of supernatural appearances, the cause of such ghostly appearances could be traced to the melancholy that was akin to madness.

Hamlet, bearing all these in mind, wonders if the Ghost is not from the Devil. Favoring the melancholia theory, Campbell says,

If my analysis is correct, then, Hamlet becomes a study in the passion of grief. In Hamlet himself it is passion which is not moderated by reason, a passion which will not yield to the consolations of philosophy. And being intemperate and excessive grief, Hamlet's grief is, therefore, the grief that makes memory fade, that makes reason fail in directing the will, that makes him guilty of sloth. Yet Hamlet is capable of an anger that demands revenge.

Campbell, then, combines two established theories in explaining Hamlet's delay.

Of a slightly different nature is the explanation offered by Arthur Sampley. We find him saying that Shakespeare perhaps wanted us to think of Hamlet as having a variety of reasons for delaying, not just one. Many critics fail to solve the problem because they isolate one reason and ignore the others. Sampley says,

Shakespeare has indicated clearly that Hamlet does delay, and he has, I think, answered clearly enough the question, Why? Thus he suggests that Hamlet is a coward (not a

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87 Lily B. Campbell, Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion, p. 121.
88 Ibid., p. 126.
89 Ibid., p. 144.
physical coward, of course), that he loses himself in words, that he fears that the ghost may be the devil, that he does not wish to send the King to heaven while the latter is praying, that he suffers from bestial oblivion, that he is hindered by the craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event. These statements are all in the play, and there is no good reason for completely rejecting any of them. The trouble in Hamlet criticism has come from the critics who wished to seize on one reason as the cause for Hamlet's delay. But that method of criticism is revision rather than interpretation.

Let us assume that Shakepeare knew what he was doing, that he meant what he wrote. He has given six reasons for Hamlet's delay. Perhaps not all of these six are equally influential, but all of them (according to Shakepeare) had their effect. And why not? Is a dramatist limited to one motive for each character? Surely any such idea is a gratuitous assumption of those who seek a common denominator of all human conduct.90

In 1931 we find Allardyce Nicoll saying that Hamlet delays for more than one reason. He ascribes the delay

(1) To the too great idealism of the hero; (2) to too great introspection and brooding over his own character; (3) to the reliance of Hamlet on the eminently sane, faithful, and sincere Horatio; (4) to his love of Ophelia; (5) to a certain moral cowardice in his nature; and (6) to an ambitious spirit, the sincerity of which he feared.91

Nicoll's theory is indeed similar to Sampley's; both attribute Hamlet's delay not to one reason, but to six reasons that Shakespeare mentions in the play.

The first half of the twentieth century, then, has seen the introduction of new theories explaining Hamlet's

delay as well as re-workings of older theories. The extent to which each of these theories is new to the twentieth century and the degree to which their initiators borrowed from earlier writings are problems that will be studied in the following chapter. The twentieth century is indeed proving fruitful in the production of literary criticism on the character of Hamlet.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Now that we have studied all the significant explanations of Hamlet's delay, we see that the theories, as a rule, fall into definite, logical schools of thought. Almost all of the twentieth-century explanations show relationships to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticisms.

The earliest explanation of Hamlet's delay, the one advanced by Hanmer in 1736, had no recognizable followers in the nineteenth century. We find E. E. Stoll in the twentieth century, however, echoing the earlier theory of Hanmer. According to this explanation, Shakespeare has Hamlet delay because dramatic necessity requires that the King be killed at the end of the play; if Hamlet had killed him earlier than he did, the play would have come to an end. Shakespeare, therefore, makes Hamlet delay.

Of a similar nature is the theory first expressed by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century and later expatiated on more fully by T. S. Eliot in the twentieth. These critics assert that the delay exists because Hamlet is an artistic failure. According to this explanation, if Shakespeare had developed his plot properly, the audience and the reader would not be conscious of a delay.
Of the same school of thought is the explanation advanced by Lewis and Robertson, who say that Shakespeare, in developing Hamlet from his sources, failed to include some of the material necessary for making the reasons for the madness and for the delay understandable. This explanation, known as the evolutionary theory, is related to the discussion advanced by T. S. Eliot in that they both attribute Hamlet's delay to Shakespeare's poor craftsmanship. These twentieth-century critics are echoing the earlier explanation advanced by Samuel Johnson.

Some critics say that there is no delay, that the causes for Hamlet's failure to execute immediately the commands of the Ghost are presented in an obvious form in external difficulties. The advocates of this theory say either that the King is surrounded by guards or that if Hamlet immediately killed him, the young prince would be deemed a murderer and killed by the people. This idea, like many others, was first expressed in the eighteenth century. Following Ritson, the eighteenth-century advocate of this theory, were such nineteenth-century critics as Ziegler, Klein, and Werder. We find such twentieth-century critics as Kittredge, Spencer, Utter, and Granville-Barker echoing this view.

These theories all attribute Hamlet's delay to circumstances outside the character of the protagonist. Far more numerous are those critics who ascribe the delay to conditions
within the character of Hamlet. The first of these theories is the sentimental theory, which says that Hamlet is a tender, young prince who is not capable of executing the deed imposed upon him. In the eighteenth century we find Mackenzie and Richardson initiating this explanation. Probably Goethe was the most influential proponent of the sentimental theory. Although Goethe had a number of followers in the nineteenth century, none of the twentieth-century critics have echoed his views. This theory seems to have lost favor after the first half of the nineteenth century.

Likewise declining in popularity is the reflective theory. The advocates of this theory say that Hamlet's delay is due to his reflective nature, that he loses himself in thought and is not capable of acting. The nineteenth-century romanticists seem to be the only critics who favor this theory to a considerable extent.

A similar theory is the one saying that Hamlet delays because he is stunned by the mass of corruption about him. The ideas advanced by Bradley and his followers are outgrowths of this nineteenth-century theory. According to Dowden, a nineteenth-century critic, and the twentieth-century advocates of the melancholia theory, Bradley and his followers, Hamlet is shocked into a state of inaction because of the action of his mother or because of the revelation of the Ghost. This theory received considerable acclaim during the first quarter of the nineteenth century,
there being a pronounced school of followers of Bradley, the first twentieth-century critic to express this idea. During the second quarter of this century, however, this theory has witnessed a marked decline in popularity.

Still attributing the delay to an element within the character of Hamlet is the conscience theory, which asserts that Hamlet delays because he feels that revenge is morally wrong. This view was first expressed in the nineteenth century in an article in *Quarterly Review*. During the twentieth century this theory has received such wide acclaim that it has been echoed by many critics, among whom are Draper, Devlin, Greg, Joseph, and Goddard. According to these critics, Hamlet hesitates in executing the commands of the Ghost because his conscience tells him that revenge is wrong. Many critics seem to believe that Shakespeare, feeling that revenge was wrong, wrote the play in order to express his aversion to revenge. Some scholars seem to believe even that Shakespeare intended *Hamlet* as a revenge play to end all revenge plays. Unlike Bradley's theory, this conscience theory has received wide discussion and acceptance during the second quarter of the twentieth century.

Only one of the major twentieth-century theories does not owe its origin to earlier explanations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This theory, which says that Hamlet delays because he has an Oedipus complex, has hardly
been considered seriously by anyone except Ernest Jones. Despite this lack of recognition, however, this theory is important.

In the modern interpretations two theories seem to be followed more widely than the others. These explanations are the conscience theory and the one saying that there is no delay, that it would be impossible for Hamlet to kill the King before he does. Although countless minor theories have been advanced and some attention has been given to other major explanations, the majority of the theories advanced during the last quarter of the twentieth century follow these two main schools of thought.
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