

*"The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!"*

## **An introduction to Hamlet's problem**

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### **Abstract**

*Hamlet*, the famous tragedy by William Shakespeare is undoubtedly one of the greatest plays ever written in English language and one of the most prominent literary works of all world literature. For centuries, readers, critics and scholars alike have been fascinated by the enigmatic and mysterious character of Prince Hamlet, the play's protagonist. They have been trying to find the answer to the most puzzling question regarding Hamlet: Why does not the Prince kill Claudius right away avenging thus his father's death? - otherwise known as Hamlet's problem. For that purpose, many theories have been developed and many solutions have been elaborated by the brightest people the world has ever known. This article attempts to address the issue of Hamlet's problem by introducing several critical interpretations provided by the best literary minds the world has ever known and modestly endeavors to unfold the perspective of its author regarding this topic.

**Keywords:** murder, revenge, suicide, insanity, Hamlet's problem.

### **Introduction**

*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, William Shakespeare's most famous tragedy, was written, as it is generally believed, in 1601-1602 on the basis of an Icelandic saga, elaborated by Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish poet and historian in his 12<sup>th</sup> century Latin recount of the history of Denmark *Gesta Danorum*; later on translated by François de Belleforest in *Histoires Tragiques* (1570); and in turn altered, developed and embellished with such bizarre craftsmanship it can be called both the most popular and the most profound theatrical work played on stage. The plot in a nutshell is this: Claudius killed King Hamlet Senior of Denmark while he was sleeping, married his wife, and usurped the throne of Prince Hamlet Junior, his nephew. Prince Hamlet is informed of this crime by his father's ghost and swears to take revenge. To achieve the goal without making his uncle suspicious, Hamlet pretends to be insane and, after some vicissitudes, fulfills the vow completely.

Prince Hamlet's duty is very clear: according to the medieval tradition, his duty is to avenge his father's death, who was treacherously murdered by Claudius, King Hamlet's brother and Prince Hamlet's uncle; according to the code of honor, it is Hamlet's duty to snatch his mother from the arms of the one who killed her first husband; according to the law of the state, as heir to the throne and as the legitimate king of Denmark, he has the duty to punish a vile crime and to ascend the paternal throne which is his by birth right and which has been taken away by an usurper; according to the natural law of self-defense, he is entitled to get rid of the man who

ambushes him to have him killed as he did with Hamlet Senior; according to what one's conscience dictates, he has the right and duty to liberate his country from a bloodthirsty tyrant. The difficulty of this task is described in the following lines, spoken by Hamlet, which summarize the whole tragedy which is tormenting the prince's soul:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right! (I.v.188-90)

From his point of view, he is absolutely right. He had hitherto lived carefree at the University of Wittenberg amidst books, higher studies, and fine arts; he was the beloved son of a heroic father, a man of unprecedented bravery; he was endowed with all moral and intellectual qualities and virtues; he loved Ophelia, the kindest and most angelic girl; he had witnessed only the bliss, the beauties and the greatness of nature and of mankind. And suddenly, this soul, delicate by education, is hit by the devastating catastrophe and Hamlet's entire world is turned upside down. Now he gets to look at the other side of the coin.

Brother kills his own brother and seduces his brother's wife; his frivolous mother marries the murderer of his father, the murderous uncle usurps his nephew's throne; his naive girlfriend, unknowingly and unwittingly, is put under the service of the usurper to spy on him; boyhood friends and companions set traps for him; the people kneel to a criminal king; Hamlet is alone, disdained and spied on by everyone; he is compelled not only to leave the university, books, studies, and the fine arts, but also to erase from his soul every other ideal, and to uproot from his heart the love for Ophelia, so as to concentrate all his will and energy to complete a bitter and heavy task.

Now he sees human vileness in all its ugliness. Denmark, beautiful as paradise, looks like a prison to him. The world has turned into hell. Life is worthless. Deep pessimism breaks his heart, confuses his judgment and impairs his vision. Suspicion about oneself and others, about life and about the world, numbs his soul and body. Will and energy are shaken from the foundations. Desperate, demoralized, paralyzed, with nightmares stuck in his throat, he has neither the strength to live nor to commit suicide. Ever since he met his father's ghost, he wanders like a sleep-walker and has become a ghost himself. Fate, after totally devastating him, puts on him the horrid and heavy burden to rectify a totally depraved state.

### Hamlet's problem

Distinguished scholar and critic Ernest Jones, in his book, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), describes Hamlet as "the most fascinating character and the most inexhaustible in all imaginative literature. The Hamlet problem is the 'riddle of the Sphinx' of English language literature." So the question is: why does Hamlet delay avenging his father's death? There are many answers to this question and a myriad of theories and interpretations surround this most mysterious and enigmatic character in all world literature, some of them provided and elaborated by the brightest minds of human history and literature. This article does not aim to refer to all of them but for the sake of coherence we will mention the most noteworthy ones, exquisitely summarized by

the American professor Paul Cantor in his book *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (1989), where he examines Shakespeare's tragedy and its protagonist in the light of Renaissance epic tradition.

Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud's biographer and disciple developed the psycho-analytic argument according to which Oedipus complex is the main culprit for Hamlet's failure to act. The Prince hesitates to kill his uncle because he identifies too closely with the latter, as Claudius in killing Hamlet's father and marrying his mother has enacted the Prince's secret desire.

Another famous interpretation was put forward by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his book *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796), describing Hamlet as a poetic soul, a morally sensitive one, who cannot bear the burden of the barbarous task he is assigned to perform and is therefore devastated by it.

Professor Cantor also refers to the equally famous Schlegel-Coleridge thesis which views *Hamlet* as a tragedy of thought, the story of a man whose tendency to contemplate and reflect profoundly on all sides of an issue prevents him from coming to any decision and eventually from executing his revenge.

However, one of the most insightful theories regarding Hamlet problem was developed by English literary scholar A.C. Bradley in his book *Shakespearean tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (1904), regarded as one of the greatest works of Shakespearean criticism of all time. Bradley examines the character of Hamlet and his failure to take revenge by making a curious parallelism between him and two other characters in the play; Fortinbras- the Norwegian prince and Laertes- Ophelia's brother and Polonius's son- who both like Hamlet have the death of their respective fathers to avenge. According to Bradley, both Fortinbras and Laertes possess in abundance the very quality which the hero seems to lack, and as readers we are tempted to exclaim that either of them would have accomplished Hamlet's task in a day. Bradley contemplates that precisely Hamlet's temperament and moral sensibility, as well as his intellectual genius make him so different from all the other characters in the play, good and bad alike, and hardly less different from most of Shakespeare's other heroes. As professor Cantor puts it, for Bradley, "Hamlet's tragedy stems from the fact that he has to deal with Claudius at just that moment in his life when he is incapable of doing so". And it is Hamlet's melancholy that Bradley views as the most plausible explanation for the delay in executing the revenge- a melancholy triggered by his father's premature and unexpected death and moreover by Queen Gertrude's hasty remarriage to his uncle. However, Bradley feels that Hamlet's melancholy is something very different from insanity, although there is no doubt it might develop into insanity.

This article with incorporate yet a last interpretation of Hamlet's character, which we find very intriguing and radical, elaborated by Leon Golden, Professor Emeritus of Classical Languages and formerly a faculty at Florida State University. In his article "Othello, Hamlet and Aristotelian Tragedy" (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1984) he examines in depth the main tenets of Aristotle's *Poetics* and how they work in the case of three great characters of world literature: Oedipus, Othello and Hamlet. Unlike the former two characters, who according to Golden are *spoudaios* – i.e. worthy of respect and possess a truly heroic nature, active heroes seeking with all their power and talent

to overmaster the circumstances challenging them, Hamlet's action is of a very temperate nature. Golden goes even further by saying Hamlet "is in many ways a passive and pathetic figure, rather than an active and tragic one" and adds that "he is a victim of external forces and of his own youth and disinclination to assume a direct responsibility for avenging his father's murder".

After having presented in short some of the major interpretations of the character of Hamlet with special focus on the prince's delay to avenge his father's murder, already known as the Hamlet's problem, we proceed now to unfold our own view on the issue. We think that the main reason for Hamlet's suffering must be sought more in that he has experienced a fatal shock than that he is incapable of reaction and action. To better understand his behavior, we must know that a sick feverish man stands in front of us, who has reluctantly left his bed to complete a sacred task, who, half immersed in a dream, exhausted, hardly breathing, tries to drag himself, up to the top of the shore before falling on the ground breathless. He is exactly neither alive nor dead, nor conscious, nor awake, nor fully asleep; he is on the verge of death, on the verge of suicide, on the verge of insanity, on the brink of the abyss, where he knows that sooner or later he will fall and be torn to pieces. His mind dwells in the graveyard among ghosts, skeletons and grimacing skulls. In order not to go mad, and not to kill himself, and not to burst because of the evil surrounding him, he must concentrate his will and energy, he must inspire his living corpse with vivacity, he must constantly urge his dead horse forward with bloody spurs for a final superhuman attack.

What makes the situation more difficult and complicated is his conscience. It is evident that the death of his father was not natural, but he wants hard evidence. He is not fully convinced even after his father's ghost speaks to him and he asks for a second proof from the wrongdoer himself by staging a play. When he has no doubt about his uncle's guilt, he waits until he finds the perfect opportunity to kill him. Hamlet does not kill his uncle while the latter is praying, because he is deeply religious, because this way his uncle could go before God repentant and whitewashed by his crime. Hamlet kills Claudius when he finds the best opportunity, when his uncle is already discredited in the eyes of the world as a murderer and a poisonous traitor. His blood feud is a work of art, a masterpiece in terms of spirit and form.

As highlighted above, according to some literary critics, scholars and renowned authors, Hamlet delays the completion of his task because he is not adept, because he lacks any of the practical virtues, because he lacks the ability to make a plan and put it into action, and which does not act except in unusual cases of coercion. The only basis for this is found in Hamlet's own rebukes as he says:

I do not know

Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;'

Sith I have cause and will and strength and means

To do't. (IV.iv.43-6)

These same rebukes are exaggerated and contradicted by the facts. Hamlet completes his task within a time not longer than four months from the day the ghost appeared, and precisely on the occasion he had chosen himself, that is, when he found Claudius drunk and full of sin; of these four months we must detract at least the first two,

when Hamlet had doubts whether the ghost was a devil's instrument or a trap; so we have at most two months left since Hamlet was fully convinced of the drama of the fratricide, played by the strolling company actors, that his uncle Claudius had indeed killed his father; and these two months are a very short time to kill a cunning king. To achieve the goal, Hamlet erases from his heart any other ideal and even sacrifices his girlfriend Ophelia, fearing that this love will bring him some sort of restraint and limitation, and this speaks of a savagely practical man.

To fool the king, he puts on the mask of foolishness and insanity, and plays this part so well that all are deceived and truly believe he has gone mad, and this shows a practical skill of cunningness and self-control to the highest degree; the trap of the fratricidal play, the "mouse-trap" as he calls it, with which he snares the king like a mouse and snatches away his horrid secret, shows that Hamlet is strangely capable of making a plan and putting it into action as subtle and so profound from a psychological point of view as the most practical and modern penal judge; the way in which he sends his so-called friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their sure death, when they were seeing him off to his death, proves that Hamlet has two main qualities at the highest degree: composure in times of danger, and lightning speed of decision-making and action taking.

The superior skill of using the sword, with which he pushes Laertes to the ground, before he falls himself, while Laertes has done nothing else but practicing his fencing skills all the time, shows that Hamlet, although he has studied philosophy, literature and art at the University of Wittenberg, is still prepared for the struggle of practical life in a violent world, in the most perfect way.

The bravery, composure and speed with which he overthrows the king in his trap, before he himself falls inside it, though he is poisoned, with one foot in the grave and almost dying, are the pinnacle of skill in action and reach the peak of legendary heroism. The argument that Hamlet does not act only when he is forced to do so can easily turn in his favor, especially when one notices how well he knows how to take advantage of these situations and turn them against his enemies. Adding to the fact, explained above, that Hamlet is half-sick, we easily come to the conclusion that he made the impossible possible in the worst cases and completed the task in a brilliant way, which we should applaud without much hesitation.

Ophelia, Hamlet's unlucky girlfriend, is one of the most tragic and pathetic figures of Shakespearean theater. The world has been turned upside down for both Hamlet and Ophelia. Ophelia was surely waiting to ascend to the peak of happiness and glory, when fate with a brutal kick rolled her down in misery, insanity and into the grave. Ophelia does not understand at all the reasons for Hamlet's tragic change, she knows very well that a fundamental change took place, which she describes in a fine way, and she feels in her heart that because of this change all her hopes of the future were crushed and her life was shattered.

She saw Hamlet as the ideal hero of her time, and now she sees him mad; she sucked the honey out of his mouth, and now she drinks his bitterness; once she heard his sweet bell, and now her ears are pierced by a hoarse sound. She saw the peak Hamlet had reached, and now she sees him plummeting, also dragging her down into the abyss. After this catastrophe, it is a salvation, for both Ophelia and Hamlet, that they

die, since life would be an unbearable torture for both of them.

As much as Ophelia resembles Hamlet, in terms of the shock of the soul, so much her brother Laertes differs from Hamlet, in terms of the way in which he avenges his father's death- Polonius- a servile, half-spy, half-clown, half-child. To begin with, the moral basis of Laertes' blood feud is doubtful, as his father was killed by Hamlet by mistake, while Polonius was eavesdropping on him. While Hamlet, before acting, becomes absolutely convinced of how and by whom his father was killed, Laertes does not ask how or by whom, but, based on the tawatur, guesses that the murderer is the king and runs towards him like a raging bull, and when the king whispers in his ear that the killer is Hamlet, he is ready to attack Hamlet, without thinking twice. Hamlet sees the dangers in detail and, after taking them all into consideration, he rushes between them, knowing where he is. Laertes is so brave that he does not see the dangers and does not know where to enter or where to exit. When Hamlet knows the people he is dealing with, he is able to play them like a fiddle and he is aware that in the figure of the king there is a cunning enemy, against whom one must act wisely; Laertes makes an uprising, triumphs and the king's life lies in his hands, but the latter, though disarmed, traps Laertes and makes him a blind tool to kill Hamlet. When Hamlet refuses to kill the praying king because of some religious scruples, Laertes is willing to kill Hamlet even inside the church. When Hamlet kills the king openly and manfully, Laertius ambushes Hamlet and kills him treacherously. When Hamlet emerges pure from the act of blood feud, Laertes comes out disgraced from all points of view and, before he dies, apologizes to Hamlet. After all, it is another strange misunderstanding to think that Shakespeare depicts Laertes as a man more skilful than Hamlet. It is true that, while the wise Hamlet is contemplating his course of action, the foolish Laertes has finished his work, but has finished it poorly and falls into the trap he has set for Hamlet, defeated, ashamed, and repenting his deed, which is a burden on his heart. King Claudius, who knows both very well, tells us which of the two is the best at work. When he is at the mercy of the rebellious Alerts, he is not afraid at all of him, he confronts him with absolute certainty and within a few minutes he manipulates him, but he is scared to death by Hamlet, since he recognizes that Hamlet is not really crazy, or rather as Polonius puts it "Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't". (II.II.218019), Claudius does not dare to face him as a man, and sets treacherous traps to backstab him.

Between the shocked Hamlet and the foolish Laertes lies the stoic Roman-like figure of Horatio. Although poor, he does not side with the powerful but with the righteous, not invited and begged to, but spontaneously, like a noble volunteer, without asking or expecting any reward in turn. With heroic composure and bravery, he undertakes the difficult task he has assigned to himself, and like a steadfast and fearless friend, he enters into all dangers by the side of a Hamlet who is disdained and eavesdropped on by all. He does not talk much, he does not complain at all, he rarely advises. In a royal court stained with blood and rotten by vices and corruption, Horatio is the embodiment of clarity and virtue; in a circle of infidelity and humiliation he is the epitome of faithfulness, honor, and dignity. His ideal is to support Hamlet in misery and alleviate his suffering. When he sees his friend dying, life seems aimless and he wants to die with him. He does spare his own life just to fulfill Hamlet's dying wish,

who asks him to live to explain his tragedy to the world. The deepest consolation for the reader of this tragedy is that, like Horatio, there are friends to death in this world, no matter how corrupt and evil it

### Conclusions

From the above we can imagine what a giant Hamlet would become, if only fate had allowed him to develop in normal conditions and opportunities. It is an inappropriate misunderstanding to view him only as an intellectual and not at all as a man of action. Hamlet is, as Ophelia describes him, "a courtier, a soldier a scholar," that is, a man of elegant manners, a man of a bright mind, and a strict man of war. Hamlet is the richest and deepest painting that has come out of Shakespeare's pen, who has portrayed himself in Hamlet's character.

Remembering that there is no small painting in the Shakespearean gallery, it is understood how difficult it is to appreciate from all points of view the greatest painting, where the playwright has put all his mastery, where he has poured all his wit, all his soul, all his heart, where he has cast the brightest lights and the darkest shadows. Even more, Hamlet is the tallest and most beautiful oak of the Shakespearean forest, but we do not see it except after it was cut down by lightning. How it was before the catastrophe can be imagined from its magnificent, mysterious and tragic ruins.

To better understand this famous play and its much controversial and debated protagonist, as well as any other Shakespearean work and character, we must remember that the play was written primarily to be performed on stage. It should therefore be read attentively and carefully, more than once and then seen and enacted on stage by actors who have captured its spirit. The simple explanations and interpretations provided in this article, cannot serve much unless they awaken the curiosity of the readers to see and judge the play for themselves. On the other hand, it is known that the acting of an established actor is worth more than hundreds of criticisms of experts and critics.

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