The fact that Hamlet, after hearing the Ghost’s command, does not revenge his father’s poisoning immediately has various explanations. But one of the most significant reasons for his procrastination, namely, the psychological obstacle to committing murder for someone who is not a killer by nature, has not been given proper emphasis in the sea of literature on the play. The article discusses this aspect of the problem, i.e., the difficulty, if not impossibility, of shedding blood for a normal human being.

**Keywords:** Ghost’s command, revenge, Hamlet’s procrastination, human aspect of the problem, psychological obstacle to committing murder.

So much has been written on Hamlet’s delay that any new discussion of the issue may seem superfluous and even unacceptable. Already in 1977, Philip Brockbank called it “the question that academic courtesy should perhaps never again allow” [1]. However, despite this “ban,” in this article I have returned to the question once again, from a specific viewpoint which might seem quite simple at first glance but has not been paid due attention.

The fact that Hamlet, after hearing the Ghost’s command, does not revenge his father’s poisoning immediately has various explanations: 1) the Prince is a thinker: a man “of mind,” not of action; 2) he understands that it is impossible to save humankind from the general sin (to “set right” the time which is “out of joint” (1.5.196–97)) by merely killing Claudius; 3) Hamlet’s conscience (meaning “moral sense of right and wrong”) prevents him from murder (“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1.83)); 4) in his view, vengeance itself is something inadmissible and inhuman (that is why, in order to demonstrate this clearly, he orders the Player to recite the story of old Priam’s savage killing by the avenger Pyrrhus); 5) Hamlet is melancholic, which makes him inactive, etc.²

All this is true to a more or less extent but there is another significant reason for Hamlet’s procrastination, namely, the psychological obstacle to committing murder for

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¹ The quotations from Hamlet and the line numbers are according to H. Jenkins’s edition [21].
² Already in 1898, A. Tolman, summarizing the existing opinions, counted sixteen reasons for Hamlet’s delay, one of which he divided into two “sub-reasons” [2].
someone who is not a killer by nature. This aspect of the problem, that is, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of shedding blood for a normal human being (I do not mean a wartime when everyone has to kill), as far as I know from the sea of literature on Hamlet, has not been given proper emphasis. The authors of various logical and illogical interpretations of Hamlet’s hesitation are so surprised at his behavior (and therefore some of them seek for unhealthy traits in his character) as though it would be no problem for them to thrust a sword into someone. There may be an objection that people had different psychology and that murder was something more usual in Shakespeare’s days, so the matter should not be judged according to today’s standards. Right, but this does not mean that shedding blood must have been equally easy for everyone.

The well-educated intellectual, thirsty for knowledge, who studies in Wittenberg and among whose distinguishing qualities, as he himself confesses (2.2.597), are weakness and melancholy, faces a severe trial. He has never craved for a brilliant display of bravery and, in his own words, is no more like Hercules than the satyr (half man and half goat) Claudius to the Hyperion (sun) King Hamlet (1.2.139–40, 152–53). If we take into account his individual qualities and what he felt when receiving the harsh and unavoidable command from the father he venerates, his procrastination will, first of all, become understandable from a purely human point of view. That is to say, the delay of murder, when the avenger is not a “Hercules,” is entirely human and should not give us reason to regard Hamlet as cowardly, “feminine” or unhealthy. However, the Prince himself does not know this truth, or knows but does not wish to reconcile himself to it. Therefore, he who can neither neglect the Ghost’s command nor carry it out straight away, looks for various excuses to postpone the revenge and, up until the final catastrophe, passes through the torturous crucible of contradictory and extreme states of mind.

When Hamlet first hears about his father’s murder, his immediate and impatient reaction is “to sweep” to his revenge with “swift wings” (1.5.29–31), so, thanks to not being “duller than the fat weed,” he earns the apparition’s praise. It seems that everything is clear: by a cruel murder, the King has been “dispatched” of life, of crown, of queen, the murderer is known and the victim’s son is resolute. It only remains to hurry up and fulfil the just punishment. Certainly, King Hamlet would behave so; it had not been difficult for him to triumph over the King of Norway in a single combat or to smite the sledded Polacks on the ice (1.1.63–66). Indeed, he might have been like Hyperion or Hercules, as the Prince believes, but he is unable to know profoundly his son’s disposition and to penetrate Hamlet’s mind and inner world, or else he would not expect a quick execution of his dreadful order.

Hamlet’s momentary outburst and his promise to sweep to revenge are not followed by action; the attempt to take on the role of a determined avenger instantly fails

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3 Some critics (see, for instance, 3) even spoke about Hamlet’s “femininity” and, which seems even more groundless, a “homosexual element in his nature” (4, where the Prince’s “curious emphasis on the physical difference between the dead King and the living Claudius” (3.4.53–65) is regarded as a hint at this). Characteristically, Hamlet’s role was also performed by women, e. g., Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) and the Armenian actress Siranuysh (1857–1932).
and is replaced by an oath to forget everything and remember only the Ghost’s command:

Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix’d with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!

(1.5.97–104)

He makes another unsuccessful attempt to pose as an avenger more than two months after the first, following the performance of the Murder of Gonzago, inspired by the shocking impact of the play on the King. If before that the procrastination could be justified by mistrust of the apparition’s story, because the spirit may have been a devil (2.2.594–99), now Claudius’s crime is proved and Hamlet, once again, has a powerful stimulus to hasten to revenge. At this very moment, under the impression of the turmoil caused by the performance of the Mousetrap, before going to his mother’s closet and in the frenzy of his impending rebuke of Gertrude, he utters words that have aroused astonishment and confusion for centuries:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

(3.2.379–383).

William Richardson, a critic of the late 18th century, in whose opinion Hamlet is a gentle and virtuous character, considers this to be a “violent resentment against his uncle,” which “is contrasted in a very striking manner, with the warnings of his moral faculty, and the tenderness of his affection” [5]. Richardson means the following words by which Hamlet restrains himself from being too cruel towards his mother:

O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:
Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;

(3.2.384–87)

Philip Edwards, after referring to some scholars’ interpretation of the Prince’s boast to “drink hot blood” as committing himself to hell and the other prevalent view (Hamlet is “awkwardly trying out the role of the avenger in fiction”), states that though both theories have a grain of truth in them, the speech itself remains unexplained [6]. It is incredible to him that, after his emotional strain during the play and “a keen and fierce verbal attack” on Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius following the perfor-
mance (3.2.289–374), Hamlet should “bellow out like some Herod on the stage” that he can drink hot blood.

Regardless of how we interpret the Prince’s strange words, his failure is evident: once again he tries to represent himself as a decided and pitiless avenger, but this is not proved by action. For not only Hamlet the Human immediately curbs with his next words the savage outburst that had seized him but he also misses the good chance to kill the praying Claudius soon afterwards (3.3.73–95). However, at this time, too, the Prince, although having found an excuse for sheathing his bare sword, again utters words which, like the “hot blood” passage, have repulsed and bewildered many readers and even horrified some of them:

And am I then reveng’d,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season’d for his passage?
No.
Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At game a-swear ing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in’t,
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven
And that his soul may be as damn’d and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

In the second half of the 18th century, Samuel Johnson deemed this to be “too terrible to be read or to be uttered” [7]. Some later critics too were shocked at Hamlet’s desire not only to kill the King but also send him to hell. Harley Granville-Barker referred to this episode as a proof that Hamlet has been led to “a devil’s labyrinth” [8]. Eleanor Prosser agreed with him (in her voluminous study entitled Hamlet and Revenge, she argued that the Ghost has an evil spirit’s traits and the Prince shouldn’t have obeyed his command). According to her [9], Hamlet becomes the Devil’s agent, for “no matter how we have seen Claudius previously, we sympathize with him in the Prayer Scene. He is a human being in torment, facing his own question of ‘being.’ Only a bigoted Pharisee swelling with more spiritual sins than Claudius would sit back smugly and crow, ‘It serves him right’” [10]. Edwards states that maybe now “the contagion of hell has touched Hamlet. But, repellent though it is that Hamlet so passionately wants the eternal perdition of his victim, it is perhaps more striking that he should think that it is in his power to control the fate of Claudius’s soul” [11]. Margreta de Grazia, the author of a recent monograph on Hamlet, considers the Prince’s wish to be “diabolic” and opines that, particularly in this episode, he takes on the role of “the Devil,” a traditional character in the medieval morality plays [12].

Perhaps Hamlet may be blamed for not having sufficient Christian mercifulness to wish posthumous blessing to the villain that has ruined his life, but everyone who condemns him for his “too terrible” words should try to imagine himself/herself in the same situation. As Goethe would say, “stand beside him” (stehen Sie ihm bei) that dreadful night when the spirit of his father appears before him (Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, 4.13). The thirty-year-old Prince (or the “youth,” as he is sometimes called), who
has just crossed the threshold of mature life but already sees nothing hopeful in the future, and whose soul has been in a constant turmoil since the Ghost’s horrible visitation, once again meets the cause of his misery and once again, even after unsheathing his sword, becomes sure that he cannot murder him unhesitatingly (in fact, also because of his inability to stab a praying man in the back). Is it really so condemnable and, moreover, terrible that in this state of affairs, at least due to irritation at his weakness, Hamlet imagines the enemy being in hell and even believes that, taking his revenge on “a more horrid” occasion, he can further the King’s damnation. This episode, a logical continuation of the delay of murder, should also be viewed from a purely human aspect. The Prince’s emotions are quite natural, and there is hardly any reason to see him in “a devil’s labyrinth.”

Richardson was “kind” to Hamlet in this case as well [14]. In his opinion, the Prince’s words rather conceal than express his real sentiments. “You ask me, why he did not kill the Usurper? And I answer, because he was at that instant irresolute. This irresolution arose from the inherent principles of his constitution, and is to be accounted natural,” Richardson rightly stated. Consequently, Hamlet’s savageness is false, he continued, for nothing in his whole character confirms it, and his words that, if Claudius is killed during prayer, he may go to Heaven are simply an excuse to avoid bloodshed which is hateful to the Prince (he is ashamed to reveal the real reason for his procrastination, that is, irresolution).

Subsequently [e. g., 15], Richardson’s view prevailed for about a century, which allowed Bradley to state in 1904: “That this again is an unconscious excuse for delay is now pretty generally agreed” [16].

Consciously or unconsciously, the opportunity is not used, and Peter Alexander correctly wrote that “Here Shakespeare has reduced almost to visual terms the whole of Hamlet’s problem” [17]. By emphasizing that the pretext is unconscious, Bradley probably means that Hamlet does not fully apprehend his “terrible” words and what impression they could leave (though Bradley also does not doubt that the Prince would really be happy to send Claudius to hell [18]), i.e., the avenger simply “begs pardon” for his paralyzed state by a lame excuse.

Although later on other scholars too supported this opinion [e. g., 19, 20] and explained Hamlet’s words as concealment of his actual thoughts and the true reason for not killing, it seems that over the last decades the tendency has changed. The editors of *Hamlet* in The Arden Shakespeare (Second Series), The New Cambridge Shakespeare, and The Oxford Shakespeare series have categorically (and wrongly) rejected the “theory of procrastination.” According to Harold Jenkins, this interpretation “is one of the most remarkable aberrations in the history of criticism,” because Hamlet’s words must be accepted at face value [21]. Philip Edwards writes that “Hamlet means what he

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4 This is one of Hamlet’s characteristic traits by which he is opposed to Laertes, who is ready to “cut his throat I’th’church” (4.7.127), and to Claudius, who approves of his words (128–129).

5 I do not mean, however, to deny that Hamlet’s words are strange and unfitting to his character, so it is understandable that they have often been cut out in performances (see 13).

6 The editors of *Hamlet* in the The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series) [13] do not express any opinion on this matter.
says in the prayer scene. The procrastination theory held that once again Hamlet was finding some excuse for not acting. This cannot be right, for a minute or two later, thinking he has found Claudius … behind the arras in Gertrude’s chamber, he kills him – only to find that it is Polonius” [22] (for Polonius’s murder, see below). George Hibbard also thinks that what Richardson says is groundless, because “there is not a shred of evidence in the text to support such an interpretation” [23].

To agree with the three distinguished scholars will mean to accept that if Claudius had not prayed at this moment, the Prince would have certainly killed him. But does this not contradict the whole character of Hamlet, the “procrastinating avenger”? Doesn’t Jenkins himself write that Shakespeare’s play is “about a man with a deed to do who for the most of the time conspicuously fails to do it”? [24].

It is worth remembering Hamlet’s own confession that he has “cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do’t” (4.4.45–46), i.e., to revenge. Of course, he has a cause and means, and perhaps strength as well, but as for will, the question remains unsolved, because there are obstacles, not completely understandable to Hamlet himself, which impede his will. He has delayed his revenge before the prayer scene and continues delaying it. This is an obvious fact, whether we like it or not, and we have to accept, even if with reserve, the “theory of procrastination.” Indeed, the delay of bloodshed is human.

As to the murder of Polonius (3.4.23–24) and later on to the sending of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death (5.2.38–53), these deeds of Hamlet, cruel as they may seem, cannot change our perception of his character as a human avoiding murder. Here we deal with an important and interesting psychological aspect to which I would like to call attention.

Sigmund Freud wrote (Die Traumdeutung, 5.4) that Hamlet is not an incapable person at all, as it has been thought, but we twice see him acting. First, when he, in unrestrained passion (in rasch auffahrender Leidenschaft), stabs Polonius through the arras, and second, when he intentionally, even insidiously, sends the two courtiers to death. This is the basis on which Freud built his theory about the “real reason” for the Prince’s inaction, namely, the Oedipus complex.7 It has been stated above that the argument of Polonius’s murder was used by others as well.

Of course, Hamlet is not “totally incapable of action” (des Handelns überhaupt unfähig), but the inability to act and to kill are different qualities. He acts in his own way: pretends madness, disturbs the King with keen and ambiguous hints, organizes the performance of the Murder of Gonzago, berates his mother and shames her, etc. The killing of Polonius does not prove the opposite: indeed, Hamlet does this in “unrestrained passion,” unexpectedly even for himself. His deed, dictated by the situation, is impulsive, not deliberate – an instinctive action, a desperate attempt to relieve at last, by sheer luck, the unbearable burden of revenge (he thinks that man behind the arras is Claudius). At this moment, the son has been even more irritated by his mother’s behavior, for Gertrude had threatened to involve other people in the quarrel and had called for help (3.4.18–23).

7 In fact, Freud speaks about this only in a footnote but, thanks to its significant influence on subsequent Shakespearean studies, his interpretation may be called a “theory.”
This is a specific psychological situation where another decisive circumstance should also be taken into consideration. An arras is hung between the Prince and Polonius, so the killer does not see his victim. This is an essential trait of Hamlet’s character: as it turns out, he is unable to plan a murder beforehand and then to look a man, even a villain, in the eye and coolly kill him [cf. 25]. He cannot plot, as Claudius, against someone or steal up on his enemy and stab him in the back. Hamlet is only able to thrust his sword, in a fit of temper, into an eavesdropper covered by an arras. Or else, again being caught unawares, he can send from a long distance the King’s servile flatterers to death (those who were taking the order of his own execution to England).

That is why, most importantly, the revenge is delayed and this unusual avenger finally kills Claudius unexpectedly and by coincidence. It happens in the last minutes of his life, when he knows that there is no more time for retreat and that the King has made another, this time successful, attempt to treacherously murder him. Before that Hamlet, finding himself in a similar unforeseen situation and full of anger about Laertes’s vile deed, had mortally wounded him – again almost instinctively. The course of events would have been different and it seems that the revenge would have never been taken, if the King and his wicked accomplice had not organized the fatal duel. Why? Because killing cold-bloodedly is normally a very difficult or impossible task for a human being. And if someone is obliged to kill but procrastinates, and we see him struggling with acute psychological problems or looking for various excuses to avoid action, this should not be regarded as something strange, morbid or unnatural, for delaying murder is human.

References


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**Abstract:** Тот факт, что услышав повеление Призрака, Гамлет не мстит немедленно за отравление своего отца, имеет различные толкования. Однако в море литературы об этой пьесе не уделялось должного внимания одной из важнейших причин того, почему он медлит, а именно, психологическому барьеру, не позволяющему совершить убийство человеку, который не является убийцей по природе. В статье рассматривается этот аспект проблемы, т. е. трудность или невозможность пролития крови для нормального человеческого существо.

**Keywords:** команда Призрака, месть, проволочки Гамлета, человеческий аспект проблемы, психологические препятствия к совершению убийства.