

Revision the Matter of Delay and Cunctation in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* By Referring to Nietzsche's Ideas

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to provide an answer to those theorists and critics who believe that we have the matter of delay in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and thus Hamlet delayed killing Claudius from the time he hears the Ghost's commands for revenge to the play's ending. In order to prove my answers I want to reject the element of delay by referring to Nietzsche's ideas about Hamlet. According to Nietzsche in his *Birth of the Tragedy*, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, the tragic hero, is profoundly affected in actions and thoughts by his mysterious condition because he is a character with the wake of the high Dionysian enlightenment thus his condition prevents him from acting on the directions given to him by his father's ghost. Hamlet manages to deny himself the act that he craves which consequently gives him more to dwell on when evaluating himself and the progress he has thus there can be no delay for this character.

Key Words: Hamlet, Delay, action, Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, Dionysian enlightenment

Introduction

A survey of the literature on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* alerts us to the great attention paid by critics to what is termed Hamlet's delay. What is being referred to, as "delay" are Hamlet's actions from the time Hamlet hears the Ghost's commands for revenge to the play's ending. The questions then are, "Does Hamlet delay?" and, "If he does delay, why does Hamlet delay? According to most critics," claims John W. Draper, 'the crucial question in the tragedy is the reason for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's murder' (165). Norman N. Holland echoes this when he summarizes Freud's psychoanalytical argument for the delay: "The basic issue of the play Freud and Jones say (and so, they point out, do many literary critics) is: Why does Hamlet delay?" (164). Edmund Wilson declares, "The problem of delay is a commonplace of Hamlet criticism" (201). It would be fair to assume that to understand why Hamlet delays is to understand much of what Shakespeare had in mind to convey to his audience about his hero. What we learn about delay, or human motivation, or the limits of human action, are among the important messages of the play. Even testing the Ghost's story, which moves the action forward until Hamlet

connects with Claudius' conscience in the play scene, is but a vehicle to debate Hamlet's possible procrastination. Therefore, his madness, his "antic disposition," is a component to get at the larger issue of delay. Wilson points out that we witness Hamlet's strange behavior even before we are aware of the delay. While the problem of Hamlet's madness is "technically associated" with the delay, it is "dramatically distinct" from it, and Wilson says that although the last two and a half acts are not "devoid of incident," Hamlet's delay is their predominant interest (203). Although the play contains what Northrop Frye refers to as many "minor problems" (On Ernest Jones believes that the "central mystery" of the play, "namely the meaning of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for his father's murder--has well been called the Sphinx of modern Literature" (22). He briefly mentions many of the critical approaches that this mystery has produced. These hypotheses are categorized from a denial of any delay at all to the "box office" view that in order for the play to have a decent length, the murder must be delayed until the end. The three most important approaches explaining the delay, he says, hinge on [1] something in Hamlet's character or constitution "which is not fitted for effective action of any kind,"

[2] the task itself "which is such as to be almost impossible of performance by any one," and [3] some "special feature" of the task that makes it "peculiarly difficult or repugnant" to Hamlet's sensitivity and temperament (26). It would seem a necessity to accurately identify the cause of the delay in Shakespeare's hero, "for the very essence of tragedy is adequacy of motivation in the main course of the plot" (Draper 165). so as to separate it from melodrama. These are all the background ideas about delay that most of the critics believe that the matter of delay is a necessity for a tragedy specially Elizabethan revenge tragedies but the thing which I want to maintain in my essay is totally the opposite one. I want to answer to this question that do we really have the matter of delay in Shakespeare 's Hamlet? Yet of the many interpretations available, Nietzsche's stands out. It was no doubt that prevented Hamlet from acting, Nietzsche would attest, contrary to the other critics that I maintained; it was not doubt, but certainty from which Hamlet suffered. It is the aim of this paper to give due attention to Nietzsche's characterization of Hamlet, as it occurs in the Birth of Tragedy and in his later works, and note the ways in which Nietzsche's account departs from other noteworthy ones. According to Nietzsche, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, the tragic hero, is profoundly affected in actions and thoughts by his mysterious condition because he is a character with the wake of the high of Dionysian enlightenment thus his condition prevents him from acting on the directions given to him by his father's ghost. Hamlet manages to deny himself the act that he craves which consequently gives him more to dwell on when evaluating himself and the progress he has made.

Argument

In order to support my ideas about Shakespeare 's Hamlet who can not have any delay I want to bring an example from Katherine Kurtz 's essay , The Metaphysical Intimations of Nietzsche's Hamlet. Kurtz in her essay asserts that, by looking at some of Nietzsche's direct and indirect references to Hamlet we can proof that there can not be any delay for him. According to Kurtz, Nietzsche's first reference to Hamlet appears in section 7 of The Birth of Tragedy which is divided into two sections: the account of the birth and death of Attic tragedy (sections 1-15), and the hope for the Germanic rebirth of tragedy through

the works of Wagner (sections 16-25) and as Nietzsche describes the lethargic effect of the return to everyday consciousness after experiencing Dionysian insight. Therefore, let us first briefly portray the Dionysian through what Nietzsche tells us of the wisdom it entails and the state of being it imparts on individuals. Using the analogy of intoxication, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian state of being in various places throughout the Birth as rapturous, as an "annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence" (BT 7) .where "everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness" (BT 1); to experience the Dionysian is simultaneously to feel terror at the dissolution of one's sense of individual self and "the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man" (BT 1) wherein "nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity" (BT 1). Witnessing the collapse of the principium individuationis—that Apollonian delimiting of boundaries whereupon we conceive of ourselves as individuals separate and distinct from each other, among the gods—Nietzsche writes:

Now all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or 'impudent convention' have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity.

Thus with wrenching force the ordered, serene beauty of the Apollonian dream world is uprooted by the Dionysian's mystic feeling of oneness that undercuts all illusions of individuation.

Accompanying this Dionysian revelry is the inevitable hangover in its wake, the revelation that "[one's] entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge" (BT 4). Every day "reality" now pales in comparison to the sublime and penetrating vision of the Dionysian. Nietzsche says, "[A]s soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states" (BT 7). Nevermore can one who has succumbed to the self-oblivion of Dionysian

states, upon return to the Apollonian sphere with its beautiful yet ultimately superficial forms, regard everyday existence in the same way. To this point Nietzsche asks, “what [could] the psalmodizing artist of Apollo, with his phantom-harp sound, mean in the face of this [Dionysian] demonic folk-song[?]” (BT 4).

Here Nietzsche makes his first reference to our Danish prince:

In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint.

In parsing Nietzsche’s meaning, it is worth noting that Nietzsche is neither saying that Hamlet and Dionysus are one and the same, nor is he saying that the Hamlet we find in Shakespeare’s play is a character in the throes of Dionysian intoxication. Rather, Nietzsche, in describing the comportment of the individual in wake of the high of Dionysian enlightenment, alludes to Hamlet in order to make his comparison. Thus, what the Dionysian individual and Hamlet have in common is that both have undergone an experience whereupon they have gained knowledge. First, it must be said that this knowledge cannot be a false knowledge, for Nietzsche says that this knowledge has been gained from true insight, from “look[ing] truly into the essence of things.” Secondly, this knowledge is not gleaned superficially; it is gained by penetrating through the surface of the everyday, by withstanding the roundtrip through the “chasm of oblivion [that] separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality” (BT 7).

Thirdly, Nietzsche tells us that this knowledge has the effect of nausea, of inhibiting action: “for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things” (BT 7). In other words, a Dionysian experience imbues us with the wisdom that we live primarily at the Apollonian surface level, and that all changes we undergo are merely appearances of change; even our consciousness of our individuated selves—the ego—is illusory. Likewise, all change

occurs at the level of appearances; at the bottom of things life remains “eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations” (BT 7). Now comprehending the futility of action from the perspective of eternity, Hamlet and the Dionysian person scoff at the triviality of day-to-day existence where they are expected to carry on with business that is ultimately trite and superficial; in a phrase that borrows directly from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Nietzsche writes, “they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint” (BT 7). Particularly when asked to fulfill a specific task—in Hamlet’s case, to right the wrongs in the state of Denmark by wreaking vengeance on his uncle—one cringes at the thought, knowing full well that nothing one could enact could ultimately matter in the grand scope of things. Thus Nietzsche continues:

Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no—true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man.

What is perhaps the most important kernel of information regarding Nietzsche’s interpretation of Hamlet as compared to other prevailing interpretations is that in Nietzsche’s understanding, something (namely, knowledge) is gained, and not lost. That is, it is not through a loss of something—some faulty faculty of reason, perhaps, or a loss of the capacity of the will—that causes Hamlet to be the way that inhibits him from having an action. Hamlet’s behavior inevitably comes down to some shortcoming. Nietzsche, however, attests that Hamlet has gained something, gained knowledge, by peering into the “essence of things.” In this difference, Nietzsche makes a significant departure from virtually all other critics of Hamlet insofar as in this divergence from the popular trope of Hamlet as one who suffers from some psychological affliction or other incapacity—someone who is, essentially, missing whatever it is that would allow him to act—

Nietzsche marks Hamlet for the first time as someone who actually possesses a far superior knowledge of reality compared to most of mankind (let alone the other characters in the play). According to Nietzsche, it is certainty, not doubt, that characterizes Hamlet and his suffering. This, rather than delay, Nietzsche finds to be Hamlet's defining principle. In a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil's* "What is Noble," Nietzsche will go on to write (in what is awfully reminiscent of our noble prince):

The spiritual haughtiness and nausea of every man who has suffered profoundly...his shuddering certainty, which permeates and colors him through and through, that by virtue of his suffering he knows more than the cleverest and wisest could possibly know...this spiritual and silent haughtiness of the sufferer, this pride of the elect knowledge, of the 'initiated,' of the almost sacrificed, finds all kinds of disguises necessary to protect itself against contact with obtrusive and pitying hands and altogether against everything that is not its equal in suffering. Profound suffering makes noble; it separates.

By all the above ideas there can not be any delay for Hamlet with his high Dionysian enlightenment. Two centuries later, Hamlet still muses; Hamlet still broods; and most critics still base their thinking on the vision of Hamlet created by the Romantics. He is a poet or philosopher by nature, and his reflections lead to internal conflict that inhibits actions. Thus I 'm totally against T.S.Eliot's idea that we should mainly focus on Hamlet 's play not his own individual character.

Conclusion

Beyond simply allowing the reader to visualize the after-effects of Dionysian experience, Nietzsche's reference to Hamlet is significant for the following reasons: (1) it grants insight into Nietzsche's unique understanding of Hamlet and (2) for Hamlet 's own character , who is most often misunderstood as someone with a hesitation and delay rather than someone without any action and high Dionysian knowledge. Nietzsche helps us to understand Hamlet,

but Hamlet, in turn, helps us to understand Nietzsche. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Nietzsche witnesses the affirmation of the tragic point of view as it has not been presented in quite some time. In Hamlet, Nietzsche recognizes one who has been imbued with the knowledge of the Dionysian and suffers from it. The knowledge that Hamlet has is the same knowledge that, once possessed, allows one to understand the wisdom of Silenus, i.e. that because humans are creatures of ends, and because all ends are merely illusory, as long as humankind expects to reach an end, some definite aspiration or attained goal, they will surely suffer. In other words, from the point of view of eternity, man falls into the chasm of oblivion. Knowing this, he falters thus can not have any action. As Nietzsche says in his golden sentence, Hamlet 's knowledge truly killed her ability to act. Knowledge kills action.

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