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Hamlet: An Indian Interpretation

WHY DOES HAMLET DILLY-DALLY IN AVENGING THE MURDER OF HIS FATHER? His father's ghost clearly exhorts him to do it. He knows it is his duty and he must do it though he does not like it.

"... O cursed spite

That ever I was born to set it right."

Taking his cue from these lines, Goethe observes, "A beautiful, pure and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him- this too hard. The impossible is required of him- not the impossible in itself, but impossible to him."

Coleridge finds other reasons for Hamlet's inaction. He says, "In Hamlet we see a great, an almost enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities. This character Shakespeare places in circumstances under which he is obliged to act. Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve." The purpose of the play, according to Coleridge is, "Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth: that action is the chief end of existence, that no faculties of intellect, however brilliant, can be considered valuable, or indeed otherwise than as misfortunes, if they withdraw us from or render us repugnant to action, and lead us to think and think of doing, until the time has elapsed when we can do anything effectively." Other critics too think that Hamlet thinks too much and, therefore, he is unable to take any effective action and their evaluation of the play emanates from this presumption.

In fact, it is most unbelievable that one of the most balanced, active and effective heroes in Shakespearean tragedies is almost unanimously considered a man of inaction and imbalance. No sooner than the ghost disappears, Hamlet is able to grasp the nature of his task involving a King, his own mother the Queen and all his accomplices and henchmen who surround the royalty, and the risk involved if anything goes amiss. He, therefore, immediately decides to feign madness-antique disposition- to beguile the wily King and his cohorts. It proves to be a very effective ploy because it rattles the King, the Queen, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and it helps Hamlet to see through the real character of these hollow men and women. It rattles the King, the Queen, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is because of his feigned madness that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are caught off their guard and sent to their deserved death. It is because of his feigned madness that he is able to mock Polonius to his heart's content. It is because of his madness that he is able to send poisoned barbs into the heart of his mother and make her realize the depth of her fall and also fulfil the ghost's desire to leave her to her God. However, his feigned madness does not affect Ophelia beyond a sigh of regret.

"O, woe is me to have seen what I have seen, see what I see."

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Ophelia gives no evidence of having outgrown her child like nature her father and brother are her idols and she cannot think of crossing their authority. She holds Hamlet in high esteem but scorns his advances and is less than honest in her meeting with him. Hamlet is irked by it and pours upon her his most ironic and scathing invective. If he kills Polonius, he kills mistaking him for the King. He is not responsible for the death of Laertes because Laertes is hoist by his own petard. Finally, he is able to expose the King in full court and kill him in full view of his countrymen, not like a common murderer or contract killer. Thus, Hamlet acquits himself most creditably and honorably. The deaths- other than the death of the King- off and on the stage are incidental, not due to Hamlets procrastination.

In the end of a tragedy the audience leave the theatre with mixed feelings of sorrow and relief- sorrow because of the tragic end of the life of the hero and relief because the hero's faults begin to be oppressive. At the end of Hamlet, the audience feels sorry because of the tragic end of a beautiful life untarnished by any blemishes. If there is some feeling of relief it is because of the play's length.