

Did Hamlet Contemplate Suicide?

Special Prize Essay, written by D. O'Leary.

In Hamlet's famous soliloquy beginning with the words, "to be, or not to be," the many readers and admirers of Shakespeare seem to find room for great diversity of opinion. These differences may be divided into two main theories; the one, that Hamlet was debating the question of self-destruction; and the other, that he was deliberating on the point whether to avenge immediately the murder of his father. For the sake of convenience I will refer to the first as the Suicide Theory, and the latter as the Vengeance Theory. I may add that of late years the latter assumption has become the more popularly accepted one, though, for one reason or another, the Suicide Theory still finds many exponents amongst Shakespeare's numerous disciples. It is interesting to note the relative merits of these two doctrines, and this may be done by a brief consideration of the circumstances of the play at the time of the soliloquy, the character of Hamlet as evidenced by his conduct in other situations, and the adaption of each hypothesis to the words of the soliloquy itself.

Let us first recall the position in which Hamlet was placed at the time of his soliloquy. It will be remembered that he felt in conscience bound to obey the Ghost's command to avenge his murder. Vengeance for the murder of a friend or relative was an old Danish custom which amounted almost to a law, and, though Hamlet exhibits many Christian-like traits, the wrong in this particular instance did not present itself to him. In Act I, sc. 5, when the Ghost first mentioned murder, Hamlet, imbued only with thought and desire of revenge, cried out:

"Haste me to know it, that I with wings as swift
As meditation, or the thought of love
May sweep to my revenge."

Yet, for all his eagerness, the act has not yet been committed. He hesitates for want of further proof. If he could only be sure of the veracity of the Messenger! As he, himself, says: "The Spirit I have seen may be the devil——" which "abuses me to damn me." In order, then, to assure himself of the truth of the Ghost's message, he has finally devised a scheme whereby he hopes to cause King Claudius, his uncle, to betray himself. He has written a part for a play which is to be enacted before Claudius that

evening, and in this he has represented the story of the murder as related to him by the Ghost. He intends to watch the effect that this sudden portrayal of the murder scene will have upon his uncle. If the King has a clear conscience, no effect will follow; but if, on the other hand, Claudius IS the murderer, then, unless he is a consummate villain, he will be unable to conceal entirely his emotions. By this device Hamlet hopes to "catch the conscience of the King." His plan being perfected and about to be put into execution, it is most unlikely to suppose that Hamlet, considering his great desire for vengeance, would now turn his mind to thoughts of self-destruction; in fact, it would appear that the thought of suicide was one of the farthest from his mind.

In the second scene of the play Hamlet, recognizing the vile character of his uncle, mourned over the shamelessness of his mother which had caused her to marry Claudius, less than a month after the death of her own virtuous husband. His faith in his mother deserted him—and with it his faith in all women. He saw her now in her true character, and he despised her. He detested his uncle for the vileness he saw in him, and his hate was further increased by the knowledge that it was this very man who was the cause of his mother's disgraceful act. His father, whom he had so dearly loved, was dead; his mother, to whom he would now naturally open the floodgates of his love, had her action lost all place in his affections; his uncle, base and mean, whom he despised, had replaced his own noble and virtuous father, and had usurped the throne which should have descended to him; he felt downcast and lonely—life no longer held any attractions for him. His very desire to live then deserted him, and for a fleeting moment the thought of suicide DID enter his mind:

"O, that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter."

Even in that moment, when all the world seems to have abandoned him, he is deterred from this act of self-destruction by the Christianity of his morals, which some claim, are far in advance of his day, but which nevertheless exhibit themselves throughout the play as an essential part of his character; and in consequence of this he quickly brushes the temptation aside. If Hamlet refused to dwell on the notion of suicide when his reasons were such as might drive a man of weaker morals to the commission of this ignoble act, is it not inconsistent to suppose that now, having re-

ceived an incentive to live from the Ghost's message, he would again turn to serious consideration of this question?

There are those who advance as an objection to the foregoing statement the fact that Hamlet was a dreamer, a noble-souled dreamer and a student; and the thought of the revenge imposed upon him by the Ghost was so repugnant to his finer sensibilities, that his own death was preferable to the distasteful act of murdering his uncle. They will not admit that vengeance in his case is an incentive to live. They would have Hamlet a man who is afraid of action; a flower-like child, born to live only in the realm of thought; a coward who would have recourse to suicide, rather than boldly do his duty as he sees it. To these I answer simply: Was the Hamlet who swore vengeance on the murderer of his father, a man of this type? Was the Hamlet who, when restrained Bernardo and Horatio from following the Ghost, cried out: "Unhand me, gentlemen, by Heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me," a physical coward?

Was the Hamlet, who stabs Polonius, or the Hamlet who sends without any compunction his two school-fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to their death, a man who was troubled and deterred from action by scruples? Or finally, was the Hamlet who stabs the King and forces down his throat the remains of the poisoned wine, a man whose conscience would cause him to shrink from action? These and other examples may be cited to show that Hamlet wished only to be certain; he did not shirk action which when he saw his way, neither did he confine his deeds solely to thought.

Apart from these circumstances, let us now consider whether the Vengeance Theory is consistent with the soliloquy itself. We find Hamlet debating the question whether or not to commit the deed—to avenge his father's death by taking the life of Claudius. He realized that such an act on his part would result inevitably in his own death. As yet he had no definite proof of his uncle's guilt. The story of the Ghost would not be believed—he had naught wherewith to support it, and in all probability it would be attributed to the mad fantasy insane state. He would be considered a dangerous lunatic, and deprived of his life as an ordinary regicide. Two alternatives present themselves to him, and he questions:

"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The stings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them."

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With regard to these lines, if I may be permitted a short digression, the upholders of the Suicide Theory maintain that Hamlet, who had not the courage to commit the deed, was debating whether to live on under the burden of his troubles, or to end them by taking his own life. The very words themselves contradict such an assumption. Committing suicide would not be "taking arms against a sea of troubles," nor "opposing" them; it would be, rather, succumbing to them.

Of the two alternatives thus presented to his mind, Hamlet immediately rejects the former as unworthy, and his thoughts turn to the death which must be his consequent to the murder of the King.

"To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished."

He thinks of death first as a relief from the sorrow and anguish that are eating into his soul; the one caused by the death of his so dearly loved father, the other occasioned by the inconstancy and shamelessness of his mother. Death! a sweet refuge from the trials and afflictions of this life," a consummation devoutly to be wished." His inherent Christian principles, however, reassert themselves, and he discards the thought of physical relief to reflect on the state of his immortal soul after its release from its bondage of the flesh;

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give pause."

Considering the question from this new angle, Hamlet begins to generalize on the fear of the unknown, which "makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of." If it were not for the "dread of something after death," any man would gladly take his own life, preferring death to the cruel and harsh treatment of this world. Hamlet realized that in his own case he did not want to die. Although death to him would have afforded a welcome relief from his sufferings, his desire to live was still stronger. This unwillingness to die was prompted, not only by a fear of the After-life, although this same apprehension played an important part in it, since, it will be remembered, Hamlet was yet doubtful regarding the integrity of the Ghost; but also

by his desire to obtain the throne so unjustly usurped by Claudius, his uncle. What benefit would be his, if in murdering Claudius he lose also his own life? Torn between these conflicting emotions, his desire to live, and his obligation to revenge the murder of his father, which would mean his certain death; and further tormented by his unwillingness to kill an innocent man, should Claudius prove such, Hamlet sums up the state of his mind in the following words:

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sickled o'er with pale casts of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn away,
And lose the name of action."

This, in fine, is the cause of his delay. Consciousness or reflection have caused him to defer the deed until he can obtain some definite proof, convincing to the people as well as to himself, and his first eager desire to kill Claudius has been put aside until such proof is forthcoming. Here the entrance of Ophelia breaks off his meditation, and he is left with the question still unsettled in his mind.

A brief review of the conclusions we have drawn from this short sketch, should now be sufficient to show us the relative merits of these two theories. Regarding the Suicide Theory, we have seen that Hamlet has less reason for his wishing to destroy himself than he had before the appearance of the Ghost; we have seen that he is not the coward the exponents of this theory would make him,—not a man who would seek refuge from trouble in the despicable act of self-destruction; and finally, considering the words themselves, we have seen that "to take arms against a sea of troubles" is an idea altogether alien to even the widest conception of suicide. On the other hand, the Vengeance Theory conforms to the circumstances in which Hamlet is placed, to his character as seen from other parts of the play, and to the words of the soliloquy itself. In the face of such evidence it would appear that the latter is the more probable and the more acceptable theory.

Lastly, the question arises: is the issue of this point of any special importance? On the surface it may appear not, but its real significance lies deeper than the surface. On it depends to a great extent our conception of Hamlet's character. I say this because many of the commentaries on Shakespeare that incline to the Suicide Theory, draw important conclusions regarding his charac-

ter from this very soliloquy. On the contrary, the exponents of the Vengeance Theory consider the character of Hamlet as evidenced in other parts of the play, and apply it to the soliloquy. The difference is manifest; the former starting on a wrong premise, from a particular instance draw a general conclusion; the latter deduce the state of Hamlet's mind in this individual instance from their knowledge of him gleaned from other situations in the play. From the former incorrect method of reasoning, has resulted the wrong idea that Hamlet is a weak character, an idea which, fortunately, of late years has come to be discarded by the majority of Shakespeare readers. These have accepted the more logical conclusion that Hamlet hesitated to act, not from lack of courage, but from want of proof to substantiate his action in his own eyes, and in the eyes of men.

"La peine de vivre sans plaisir vaut bien le plaisir de mourir sans peine."

(Le poverello d'Assise.)

• Sonnet

Voici que nous levons nos fronts vers l'Avenir :
Il s'offre a nous drapé de l'immense espérance
D'un astre qui s'en vient mûrir cette semence
Que répandront nos, mains, que le ciel va bénir

Puis étendant nos bras chargés de gerbes d'or
Nous irons par les champs vers l'ultime barrière
Mais le dernier enclos ne mène qu'au cimetière
Ou gisent, sous leurs blés, ceux que fauche la mort.

Voici que nous levons nos fronts d'adolescents :
Pour couronne ils n'auront que des cheveux tout blancs
"Amassons des trésors que les vers et la rouille

Ne rongent point," alors au soir de nos travaux
Nous ne demanderons au monde qu'un tombeau
Ou notre âme pourra secouer sa dépouille.

—Georges Etienne Blanchard, '28.