disclose the reason of it, and must, by all means, keep the cause of that change, or even any whisper of it, from reaching the King or the Court. A behaviour so strange, so odd, so unaccountable, must needs appear to others to have sprung from a stroke of madness. All this he clearly forecasts, as indeed he well may. And he desires, apparently, that his action may be so construed: he lets his "antic disposition" have free course; and rather studies than otherwise to sustain and strengthen the imputation of madness, by his conduct. If any see fit to call this feigning, so be it: the question is not worth wrangling about. "To this degree," says Professor Werder, "to this degree, which is relatively slight, he makes believe, he *plays* the madman. But, because it is essentially his truth, the effect of his real suffering, of his shattered being, to which his mind gives vent, so far as it can without betraying his secret; because it is *his* torture, his rage, his cry of woe, his agony, thus outwardly expressed; therefore this playing of his is not *merely* feigning, and because not merely, therefore not feigning at all, in the strict sense of the word."

Hamlet's alleged Defect of Will.

Our hero is not indeed master of the situation; but he *understands* the situation, which is just what most of his critics have not done; and he is not master of it, simply because, as things stand, such mastery is quite beyond the power of any man, without help from above. The critics in question insist upon it, that the one thing which Hamlet ought to do, and which he would do, if he had any real backbone of executive energy, is, to strike the avenging blow with instant dispatch, on the first opportunity. Such an opportunity he has, or can make, at almost any time.

But to do thus would be both a crime and a blunder, and a blunder even more than a crime. How shall he justify such a deed to the world? how vindicate himself from the very crime which must allege against another? For, as he cannot subpœna the Ghost, the evidence on which he is to act is available only in the court of his own conscience. To serve any good end, the deed must so stand to the public eye as it does to his own; else he will be in effect setting an example of murder, not of justice. And the CROWN will seem to be his real motive, duty but a pretence. Can a man of his "large discourse looking before and after" be expected to act thus?

We, to be sure, long impatiently to have the crowned murderer get his deserts, because the whole truth of his guilt is known to us; but the people of Denmark, Hamlet's social and political world, know nothing of it whatever, and can never be convinced of it, should he proceed in that way. For the Ghost's disclosures were made to his ear alone; nobody else heard a word of them. And is it to be supposed that the Ghost's tale will be received on his sole word? that, too, in behalf of an act by which he has cut away the only obstacle between himself and the throne? The very alleging of such grounds will be regarded as, if possible, a worse crime than that in defence of which they are alleged. To the Danish people Hamlet will needs himself appear to be just what he charges Claudius with being. Claudius is their lawful King; they are his loyal subjects: they will not suffer their chosen ruler to be assassinated with impunity; they will hold themselves bound to wreak upon Hamlet the very vengeance which he claims to have wreaked upon him. Unless he summons the Ghost into court as a witness, every man will set him down either as a raving maniac, to be held

in chains, or else as a monstrous liar and villain, who has murdered at once his uncle, his mother's husband, and his King; and then has trumped up a ghost-story in order at the same time to shield himself and to blacken his victim.

Most assuredly, therefore, the deed which the critics in question so loudly call for is the very thing of all others which Hamlet ought *not* to do, which he must not do; which, moreover, he cannot do, for the simple reason that he is armed with such manifold strength; because he is strong in reason, in judgment, in right feeling, in conscience, in circumspection, in prudence, in self-control, as well as in hand, in courage, in passion, in filial reverence, and in a just abhorrence of the King's guilt. That he does not deal the avenging stroke at once, — than which nothing were easier for him, were he not just the strong-willed man that he is; were he a mere roll of explosive, impotent passion, like Laertes; — this the critics aforesaid ascribe, some to constitutional or habitual procrastination, others to an intellectual activity so disproportionate as to quench what little force of will he may have.

Against all this, I make bold to affirm that, if Hamlet has any one attribute in larger measure than another, it is that very power which these critics accuse him of lacking. They, forsooth, see no strength of will in him, because, while he has this, he has also the other parts of manhood equally strong. Now, the main peculiarity, the most distinctive feature of Hamlet's case is, that, from the inevitable, pressing, exigent circumstances of his position, — circumstances quite beyond his mastery, quite beyond all mere human mastery, — his strength of will has, and must have, its highest exercise, its supreme outcome, in self-restraint and self-control; an indwelling power laying the strong hand of law

upon him, and causing him to respect the clear, consenting counsels of reason, of prudence, of justice, and conscience, — counsels which his quick, powerful, well-poised intellect perfectly understands. And the act which the critics require of him, so far from evincing strength of will, would do just the reverse; it would evince nothing but the impotence of a blind, headlong, furious passion, — a transport of rage so violent as to take away all that responsibility which everybody understands to adhere to a truly voluntary act. In other words, it would be an act not so much of executive energy as of destructive fury.

Why Hamlet does not strike the King.

Hamlet, as before observed, is called upon to revenge a crime which is altogether unproved, and which, from the nature of the case, is utterly *unprovable*, except from the criminal's own mouth: apart from this source, he has not, and cannot get, a particle of evidence available for impressing upon the world wherein he lives a judicial or even a moral conviction of the King's guilt. This is just the cardinal point in Hamlet's case. So that, matters standing thus, killing Claudius would be not so much a punishment of the guilty as a murder of the proof. As the only possible evidence is to come from Claudius himself, he must by all means be kept alive, till he can be made his own accuser, and a witness against himself; or rather, till either his conscience shall drive him to "proclaim his malefactions," or else his guilt, to barricade its safety, shall thrust him upon other crimes so monstrous and so evident, that all shall see him as he is, and acknowledge his punishment just. Meanwhile, Hamlet must, above all things, refrain from the avenging stroke; must strain his utmost powers, if need be, to that

end. That he does thus hold himself back from the deed to which his burning passion for justice and his righteous thirst of vengeance are continually urging him, — in all this I must still think he displays an almost superhuman degree of that very thing which he is alleged to be without.

The critics indeed talk just as if it were a matter lying solely between Hamlet and Claudius; just as if the people of Denmark had nothing to say, no rights involved, no concern, in the question. Hamlet does not see it so; and he would discover a pitch of egotism literally inhuman, if he did. Every lover of his kind naturally desires, both in life and in death, the good opinion of his kind. This is partly because such opinion is an indispensable condition of his serving them. And so Hamlet has a just, a benevolent, and an honourable concern as to what the world may think of him: he craves, as every good man must crave, to have his name sweet in the mouths, his memory fragrant and precious in the hearts, of his countrymen. How he feels on this point, is touchingly shown in his dying moments, when he wrenches the cup of poison from Horatio's hand, and appeals at once to his strong love and his great sorrow: —

> O God, Horatio! what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
> If ever thou didst hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.

Thus the hero's hands are inextricably tied, — tied, not through any defect, nor through any excess, in himself; not through any infirmity of will or courage or resolution, but from the insurmountable difficulties of his situation. It is not that an intellectual impetuosity, or a redundancy of thought, cripples or any way retards his powers of

action; but that the utter impossibility of acting, without covering himself, in all human account, with the guilt of parricide and regicide, prodigiously stimulates and quickens his powers of thought, and keeps his splendid intellect in an incessant transport of exercise. And so the very plan of the drama, as I understand it, is to crush all the intellectual fragrance out of him, between a necessity and an impossibility of acting. The tremendous problem, the terrible dilemma which he has to grapple with, is one that Providence alone can solve, as Providence does solve it at the last.

As if on purpose to warn and guard us against imputing Hamlet's delay to the cause alleged, the Poet takes care to provide us with ample means for a different judgment; showing him, again and again, to be abundantly energetic and prompt in action whenever the way is clear before him. So it is in his resolution to meet and address the Ghost; in his breaking away from the hands of friendship when the Ghost beckons him to follow; in his devising and executing the scheme for making the King's "occulted guilt unkennel itself"; and especially in his action on shipboard, when he sends the King's agents to the fate they have prepared for himself. In these cases, as in various others also, he discovers any thing but a defect of active energy: his mental powers range themselves under the leading of a most vigorous and steady will. And his conduct appears, moreover, strictly normal, and not spasmodic or exceptional; I mean, it is clearly the result of character, not of disease.

Why the Poet does not make Hamlet strike.

Thus much for the reasons of Hamlet's course, as these are personal to himself. But the Poet had other reasons of his own, indispensable reasons of art, for not making Hamlet

act as the critics would have him. Shakespeare portrays many great criminals, men, and women too, who for a while ride in triumph over virtue wronged, persecuted, crushed. And he always brings them to punishment, so far as this world can punish them. But he never in a single instance does this till their crimes are laid open to the world, so that all about them recognize the justice of their fate, and are righteously glad at what befalls them. In all this Shakespeare is profoundly, religiously true to the essential order and law of all right tragic representation. For our moral nature, as tuned in sympathy with its Source, reaps a deep, solemn, awful joy from such vindications of the Divine law.

Now the very nature and idea of a proper tragic revenge or retribution require that the guilty be not put to death, till their guilt has been proved; and so proved, that the killing of them shall be manifestly a righteous act, — shall stand to the heart and conscience of mankind as an act of solemn and awful justice. To such a revenge, — the only revenge that Hamlet can execute or ought to execute; the only revenge, too, consistent with the genius of the work; — to such a revenge, punishment is necessary; to punishment, justice is necessary; to justice, the vindication of it in the eyes, not merely of the theatre, but of those among whom the action takes place. So that, if Shakespeare had made Hamlet kill Claudius a moment earlier than he does, he would have violated the whole moral law of his art, — that law whose "seat is the bosom of God, her voice the harmony of the world." And in that case the tragic action, instead of being, to the persons concerned, in any proper sense a righteous proceedure, instead of appealing to their high and sacred sympathies with justice, would be a mere stroke of brutal violence, or, at the best, an act of low, savage, personal revenge; such an

act as would inevitably array their sympathies with justice *against the avenger of crime*, and enlist them in behalf of the criminal. Thus the proper music of the work would be utterly untuned, and for the terrible of tragic art would be substituted the horrible of untragic bungling. This were to write tragedies for the coarse theatrical sense, for the vulgar apprehension of the crowd before the curtain, and not for the inner courts of the human soul!

Catching the King's Conscience.

All through the first two Acts of the play, and until late in the second scene of the third Act, Hamlet more or less doubts the honesty of the Ghost. The old belief in ghosts held, among other things, that evil spirits sometimes walked abroad, in the likeness of deceased persons, to scare or tempt the living. Hamlet apprehends the possibility of its being so in this case. He therefore craves some direct and decisive confirmation of the Ghost's tale from the King's conscience. When the advent of the Players is announced, he instantly catches at the chance, thus offered, of testing the question, and the possibility, if the Ghost's tale be true, of unmasking Claudius, and of forcing or surprising him into a confession. Nothing could evince more sagacity in planning, or more swiftness in executing, than the action he takes in pursuance of this thought: —

> I've heard
> That guilty creatures sitting at a play
> Have by the very cunning of the scene
> Been struck so to the soul, that presently
> They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
> For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
> With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father
> Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;

I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the Devil: and the Devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy, —
As he is very potent with such spirits, —
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this: the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

The scheme, I need not say, succeeds. The King's behaviour in the interlude fully authenticates to Hamlet, perhaps also to Horatio, the Ghost's tale. Hamlet now *knows* that Claudius is indeed guilty. And Claudius also, as Hamlet well understands, knows that he knows it. But the evidence thus caught, however assuring to Hamlet, is nowise available for the ends of social or even dramatic justice. The Ghost's tale is still just as impossible to be proved to the mind and heart of Denmark, as it was before. But this advantage has been gained, that Claudius must now do one of two things: he must either repent and confess, or else he must try to secure himself by further measures: an attitude merely passive or defensive will no longer do. If he does not repent, there is henceforth a mortal duel between him and Hamlet: one, or the other, or both, of them must go down. As Hamlet lives but to avenge the murder, he must neither die himself nor let the King die, till that work is done. Force he has a hand to repel; fraud he has a mind to scent out, to detect, to defeat; and Claudius must get up very early, and be very busy when up, to out-craft him.

Hamlet seeing the King at Prayer.

The result of the interlude excites Hamlet to the uttermost: his faculties, his sensibilities are all wrought up to

their highest tension. All on fire, as he is, he may well say,

Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

In this state of mind he comes upon Claudius while in the act of praying. Now he has a fair chance, now, in his white-heat of rage, to deal the avenging blow: the self-convicted fratricide is there, alone, before him, and is completely at his mercy. All through his frame the blood is boiling: still his reason tells him that such a hit will be a fatal miss, and will irretrievably lose him his cause. His judgment, his prudence, his self-control are assailed and pressed by such an overwhelming stress and energy of passion, that they are all but forced to give way: so mighty is the impulse of revenge within him, that even his iron strength of will can hardly withstand it: and, to brace his judgment against his passion, he has to summon up a counterpoising passion in aid of his judgment. Even his inexpressible hatred of the King is itself called in, to help him through the potent temptation, and to keep him from striking the King. This, I take it, is the meaning of the dreadful reasons and motives which he raves out for sparing Claudius. He will take him while in the act of committing such sins as will make sure the perdition of his soul. In all this, it seems to me, the providence of the drama is using one of Hamlet's maddest fits, to foreshadow the far deeper, fouler, more damning sins amidst which this execrable wretch ultimately falls.

Hamlet with his Mother.

Now that Hamlet is, beyond all peradventure, certified of the King's guilt, the next thing for him to do is, to come to

a full and perfect understanding with his mother. He must see her by herself. He must search her breast to the bottom, he must "turn her eyes into her very soul," with his burning eloquence of indignation, of shame, of reproof, of remonstrance, of expostulation: he must arouse the better feelings of the woman and the mother in her heart, and through these, if possible, must redeem her from the blasting curse of her present position: above all, he must know from her directly, either through her words or her manner, whether she was any way conspirant in the murder of his father, and must also let her know, with an emphasis not to be resisted, both his opinion of Claudius and how matters are standing between Claudius and himself. While he is on the point of doing this; while, with his soul agitated to its innermost depths, he is talking with her; while he is standing in the room and beside the bed in which himself was born, and which she has so shockingly dishonoured; Polonius, on a sudden, raises an outcry behind the hangings: Hamlet, supposing the voice to be the King's, is surprised, snatched, swept quite away from himself with a whirlwind gust of passion: instantly, with the speed of lightning, out leaps his sword from the scabbard, as of its own accord, and kills the old intriguer.

How the Revenge is brought about.

By this instant lapse of self-control, Hamlet has lost his lead in the game, and given Claudius a great advantage over him; which advantage, however, Claudius will so use as to open a clear way for the final triumph of Hamlet's cause, though at a fearful cost of life, his own among the rest. Claudius is now to assume the offensive, and is so to carry it as to achieve his own ruin. For, indeed, his guilt is of

such a kind, and is so placed, that it can have its proper retribution only through a process of further development. A dreadful safety indeed! But he will prove far unequal to the sharp exigency in which he will involve himself. Too bad to repent, and too secure in his badness to be reached by human avengement, there is, nevertheless, a Hand which he cannot elude. That Hand is to work his punishment through the springs of his own moral constitution. Hamlet's piercing, unsleeping eye, now sharpened to its keenest edge, is to be upon him, to penetrate his secretest designs, to trace him through his darkest windings, as his evil genius. His guilt is to entangle him, by an inward law, in a series of diabolical machinations; remorse is to disconcert his judgment, and put him to desperate shifts. Thus his first, most secret, unprovable crime is to goad him on, from within, to perpetrating other crimes, — crimes so open and manifest as to stand in no need of proof; and he is to go out of the world in such a transport of wickedness, lying, poisoning, murdering, that "his heels shall kick at Heaven," sure enough.

Such is the stern, awful, inexorable moral logic of this mighty drama. And its great wisdom lies in nothing more than in the fact, the order, and the method of the hero's being made to serve as the unconscious organ or instrument of the providential retribution. He himself, indeed, is consciously doing the best that can be done in his situation. Meanwhile the Nemesis of the play is working out the result through him, without his knowing it, without his suspecting it. Not till the hand of death is already upon him, does it become possible for him to strike. Now, at length, the seals are opened; now, for the first time, his hands are untied, his passion, his avenging impulse, his will are set free. All this he sees instantly just as it is: instantly, *con-*

sciously, he deals the stroke for which his Divine Helper has secretly prepared the way. He himself falls indeed, but falls as a pure and spotless victim, to feed the sacrificial fire of immortal hopes and aspirations in the human breast; so falls as to leave upon us the hallowed sense, that "flights of Angels sing him to his rest."

Hamlet's Self-Disparagement.

I must not dismiss the hero without adverting briefly to one or two other points. — Many people, I suspect, shape their opinions and feelings about Hamlet quite too much from what Hamlet, in some of his soliloquies, says against himself. In this, they seem to me to take him at his word just there where his word is least to be taken. For, surely, thus to turn his solitary self-communings, his thinkings-aloud, against him, is not fair. Instead of so taking him at his word, we ought to see him better than he then sees himself, and rather, with our calmer and juster vision, to step between him and his morbid self-accusings; to judge him and to maintain his cause upon reasons which he is himself too unselfish, too right-hearted, too noble in mind, to accord their due weight in his thinkings. This holds especially in regard to his soliloquy beginning, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" where he surges through a long course of railing and storming at himself, bitterly charging himself with faults and vices which his whole conduct most certainly and most clearly acquits him of. This tempestuous strain of self-abuse springs in part from his madness, his disease, which vents itself in that way, and puts him thus to quarrelling with himself, because, in the extreme, unrelenting hardness of his case, he nevertheless will not, dare not go to accusing or arguing against his fate, or fall to quarrelling with what he regards as the inevitable orderings of Providence.

The truth is, Hamlet is suffering dreadfully: shame, indignation, grief, sympathy with his father's purgatorial pains, detestation, horror, at the triumphant murderer, a consuming, holy thirst of vengeance, impossible, as things stand, to be attained, — all these are crowding and pressing his soul together; and his intolerable anguish, instead of easing itself by blaming, by resenting, by deploring his miserable lot, seeks such relief as it can by arraigning himself before himself, as deserving a lot far worse. He thus revenges upon himself, as it were, the inexorable cruelty of his position.

All this is what some of the Poet's critics cannot or will not see; and Hamlet appears to them cold, hard-hearted, indifferent, because they are themselves either so hard or so locked up in their self-applauding critical perspicacity as to have no ear, no sense for his mute agony. And so they tak him at his word! not perceiving that what he says to himseh against himself are just the things he would be sure *not* to say, if they were really true; while the things which he does *not* say are so true, and so unutterably crushing in their truth, that he *must* be saying something else. Because he "has that within which passeth show," therefore what he *does* show is taken as a just index and exponent of what he has within.

Pathos of Hamlet's Situation.

This brings me to one of the most peculiar and most interesting features in the delineation of Hamlet. — In his intellectual powers, attainments, resources, Hamlet is highly self-conscious, though not at all touched with conceit. In his moral instincts, sentiments, principles, in his beautiful train of manly virtues, his courage, his honour, his reverence, his tenderness, his sense of truth and right, his human-heartedness, his generosity, his self-restraint, his self-sacrifice, —

in these he is nobly unconscious; and rather shows his full, deep possession of them by a modest sense, or fear, of his being deficient in them: for these things are apt to be most on the tongue where they are least in the heart. Hence, in part, the singular vein of pathos that permeates the delineation. That pathos is altogether undemonstrative, silent; a deep undercurrent, hardly ever rising to the surface, so as to be directly visible, but kept down by its own weight. Hamlet, as I said before, suffers, suffers dreadfully; but he makes no sign, at least none when his suffering is greatest; or, if any at all, so very slight, as to be scarce heard amidst the louder noises of the play; as in what he says to Horatio, near the close: "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter: it is but foolery; but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman." Thus his suffering is not made audible to the sense: it is speechless, indeed unspeakable, and left for the inner eye, the intelligent heart, the sympathizing magnet within, to *infer*.

Such is the unspoken pathos of Hamlet's situation, — a pathos so deep, so pure, so refined, so soul-moving, if we have but the eye to see it, that I know not where else we shall find its like. Let us see, for a moment, to recur to a topic already discussed, — let us see how it is with him. If he could but forget the real nature of his task; if he could give free course to his mighty impulse of justice; then he might indeed have at least a respite to the torture that is wringing him. But, because his reason is so strong as to stay his hand, therefore he has to suffer such pain, — the pain of a most powerful will engaged in a mortal struggle against the insurgent forces of passion goading him onward. To quote again from Professor Werder: "To smite down

the King, to sacrifice his own life by the blow, in order to be quit of his task at once, that were the easiest, the happiest thing for him; but he *wills* to fulfill it, to *fulfill* it faithfully. What he rails at as 'pigeon-livered,' when the mortal nature, impatient of pain, weary of suffering, cries out in him, — all this is enduring courage, the courage of reason, springing from reverence for a holy duty, and from devotion thereto."

But, harsh and bitter as is his lot, Hamlet never complains of it, hardly breathes an audible sigh over it: nay, he will not, if he can help it, let either himself or others see it: heroically he bears it, heroically he hides it. Of self-pity, of self-compassion, he discovers not the slightest symptom; and, so far from saying or doing any thing to stir pity or compassion in others, he is ever trying, though trying spontaneously and unconsciously, to disguise his inward state both from others and from himself; — from himself in high strains of self-accusation; from his true friends in smiles of benevolence, or in fine play of intellect; from his foes and his false friends in caustic, frolicsome banter, and in pointed, stinging remonstrance or reproof. Even when his anguish is shrieking within him, he knits his lips down tight over it, and strangles the utterance. For, indeed, to his mind, it is not of the slightest consequence how much he suffers in this world, so he does his duty, his whole duty, and nothing but that; and he is so all-intent upon that as to have no time, no heart, for self-commiseration. Now this utter oblivion of self in his vast, incommunicable sorrow is to me just the most pathetic thing in Shakespeare; though, to be sure, the pathos is much less pronounced than in other cases: but I deem it all the better for that.

It is partly to relieve or divert off his sense of woe that his mind is so continually "voyaging through strange seas of