

“Tragic Destiny: The Dynamics of Hamlet’s
Dis-ease and Redemption” (Part One)

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While man’s desires and aspirations stir,
He cannot choose but err.

– Goethe, FAUST (Part One)

Introduction

During the last four hundred years much has been written about *Hamlet* and

every fresh commentator who studies and writes about *Hamlet* ... thinks that he has reached to the true foundation, which, nevertheless, lies all the while still deeper and beyond his researches.¹

Moreover, the play and its protagonist are enormously complicated; and anything that one says about it leaves one suspect, indeed haunted, about what has not been said.² However, a certain confidence comes from being familiar with the play for more than thirty years, as well as from the fact that since the advent of reader–response criticism, we are no longer bound by the restrictive view proposed by Matthew Arnold “to see the thing in itself as it really is”.³ I am therefore content that my attention to this or that in the text and my understanding of those elements will be determined by my interests and the weight of my experiences. Not that I wish to lapse into a solipsistic monologue that has meaning only for myself. Hopefully, some readers will find that what is said here is in tune with their own understanding in the matter; while others will be introduced to yet another and I hope enlarging experience related to the play.

There are some views that do not appeal to my own sense of what the play is about. The first of these is the historical view which proposes that the play can best be understood by understanding the ideas, attitudes, and customs of the time in which it was produced. Critics like Tillyard are unable to convince me that knowing the details of the Elizabethan world view will do more than explain some of the surface meaning of the play, nor will it in any way convey the play's importance for me, living in another time and place with other preoccupations.⁴

Another approach I find objectionable is that taken by those who see either all the elements in the play as symbols or the entire play as myth. Otto Rank, who views the play as "a gestalt of compelling attitudes and drives represented by the various characters and motives;"⁵ and Gilbert Murray, who takes a more or less Jungian approach by seeing the play as a re-enactment of myth and ritual,⁶ are both guilty of abandoning the scientific principle that the simplest possible explanation is always the most elegant. I believe that the reader should not attribute symbolic meanings, either to individual elements in the text or to the text at large, reading it as myth, except in so far as the simpler literal meanings are unavailable or are insufficient and then only in so far as the integrity of the text, that is, the unity of symbolic and non-symbolic elements, can be maintained.

Most repugnant are those who have sought to demean the value of the play, its protagonist or its author. Chief among these in our own century is T. S. Eliot, who proposed that Shakespeare had tackled a problem which proved too much for him because he was unable to find an 'objective correlative' by which to express the emotion that dominates Hamlet.⁷ Eliot's view, as well as others who likewise hold a low opinion of the play, needs little rebuttal here since they differ from the vast majority of informed and educated opinion.

Finally, I am neither comfortable with nor convinced by

the arguments of deconstructionism which terminates the referential meaning of words before they have had the opportunity to follow Hamlet's advice about the purpose of playing : "whose end, both at first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature" (III.ii.21-22)⁸ Words, as the deconstructionist claim, do refer to other words first, but their meaning must ultimately refer to the world of fact; and fictional personages, fabricated out of words, are a kind of fact, since they refer to our ideas of persons in the factual reality of our lives.⁹ For this reason, as well as in respect to my own immediate response as audience to the play, I take sides with the critical tradition that includes Dr. Johnson, the 19th century psychological realists, such as Bradley, and the 20th century psychoanalists, all of whom understand literary character as an imitation of human character.

Hazlitt observes that Hamlet's words are as our own thoughts, since it is we who by a natural sympathy are Hamlet;¹⁰ and describing the general extent of realism in the play he asserts that:

it abounds in striking reflections on human life. . . . There is no attempt to force an interest: every thing is left for time and circumstances to unfold. The attention is excited without effort, the incidents succeed each other as a matter of course, the characters think and speak and act just as they might do, if left entirely to themselves. There is no set purpose, no straining at a point. The observations are suggested by the passing scene . . . The whole play is an exact transcript of what might be supposed to have taken place at the court of Denmark, at the remote period of time fixed upon.¹¹

Having settled on a general critical outlook by which to understand the play, the specific focus of this investigation remains to be determined. Once again, I will not depart from the traditional critical point of view that sees the character of Hamlet as the nucleus of the play and a center for the reader's

attention. As early as 1710, the Earl of Shaftsbury remarked that the play is “a Series of deep Reflections, drawn from one Mouth” to such an extent that “It may be properly said of the play, if I mistake not, that it has only one Character or principal part;”¹² and, as recently as 1990, Harold Bloom agreed that “the question of *Hamlet* can only be Hamlet.”¹³ These readers align themselves with all those who believe that tragedy essentially concerns itself with the individual and the individual’s capacity to value rather than with the broader fabric of the political or social situation that the protagonist finds himself in.¹⁴

There are other elements of the play that clamour for the reader’s attention. The Ghost, especially for the modern reader, is a proper subject for inquiry, precisely because it might be an obstacle to viewing the play as “a mirror held up to nature.” Also the social, political and existential situations in which the protagonist finds himself is worth our attention, in so far as they determine or permit the uses and abuses of psychological energy which lies at the heart of the human soul and empowers it to err or act in a redeeming way.

The Dynamics of Hamlet’s Problems:

Numerous ideas have been offered to explain why Hamlet delays the revenge of his father’s murder. The question would not have to be raised at all if Shakespeare had followed the standard revenge play practice of having his protagonist spend a good deal of dramatic time in search of the identity of the guilty party. As it is, the identity of the murderer is revealed by the ghost to Hamlet at the end of the first act. “No theory,” therefore, “will hold water which finds the cause of Hamlet’s delay, merely, mainly, or even to a considerable extent, in external difficulties.”¹⁵ The motive has been supplied to him. He has the information he needs; and the opportunity to revenge is there more than once during the course of the play.

This forces us to conclude that Hamlet’s delay is due to some internal moral or psychological cause or causes. The least

probable theory indicates that Shakespeare was questioning the moral basis of revenge. Responsible critics have dismissed this idea as untenable. Hazlitt calls it a narrow minded "drabcolored quakerism;"¹⁶ and Coleridge remarks that as so far as his duty is concerned Hamlet knows what he has to do and over and over again he makes up his mind to do it.¹⁷ Bradley also notes that the idea that Hamlet was restrained by conscience or any moral scruple is not supported by the text. If anything, a great deal in the text can be cited to disprove this argument.

Hamlet, it is impossible to deny, habitually assumes, without any questioning, that he ought to avenge his father. Even when he doubts ... the honesty of the Ghost, he expresses no doubts as to what his duty will be if the Ghost turns out to be honest.¹⁸

An ingenious variation on this theme is that Hamlet's problem is "aesthetic" rather than moral. Revenge itself is not objectionable to Hamlet, but the usual form it takes is not elegant or restrained enough for the Prince.¹⁹ But this idea is hardly confirmed by Hamlet's two third Act soliloquies. In the first of these, immediately following the play within the play, he seems to favor a most inelegant aesthetic. "Now could I drink hot blood," he says, "And do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on." (III.ii.381-3) Nor does he mince words about the sinister, some would say barbaric, way he plans his revenge upon Claudius at the end of the next soliloquy:

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-swearing, 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. (III.iii.88-95)

Elmer Edgar Stoll adequately disputes any moral indictment against Hamlet as a cause of his delay by pointing out that

nowhere in the play is there anyone who comments on Hamlet's moral shortcomings.²⁰ Instead, the other characters make the psychological indictment that Hamlet is mad. First Ophelia reports Hamlet's piteous behavior "As if he had been loosed out of hell" (II. i .83); whereupon Polonius constructs a theory of madness based on Hamlet's unrequited love for his daughter (II. ii .139-50); and conceding the idea, later in the play, both the King (III. i .190) and the Queen (III. iv .106) remark on Hamlet's madness.

Is this the key to Hamlet's behavior and the cause of his delay in doing the revenge? Many have thought so. Knight comments that Ophelia's description of Hamlet in her closet (II. i .77ff) is no mock madness. While earlier in the first Act of the play Hamlet indicated to Horatio and Marcellus that he might "put an antic disposition on" (I. v .180) there is no reason to believe that he would first try this mock disposition out on the uninvolved and, at least at that point in the play, innocent Ophelia.²¹ The question of whether Hamlet is truly mad has been endlessly disputed. Those who claim he is not mad find ample justification for their interpretation in the fact that Hamlet himself claims that he is not mad, first at the end of the Act one ghost scene (already cited) and again, to Rosencrantz & Guildenstern when he claims "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw." (II. ii .374-5)

Yet, counterbalancing these self descriptions are Hamlet's own accusations that he is, indeed, mad. Both in the scene where he confronts Ophelia in her closet (III. i .148-9) and in his final soliloquy (IV. iv .58) he proclaims his mental infirmity. Furthermore, while in the story of *Amlæth*, told by Saxo-Grammaticus, the protagonist feigns madness in order that he might be allowed to remain at court safely, without suspicion falling upon him, Hamlet never achieves this since he is suspected almost from the start.²²

The ambiguity surrounding the question of Hamlet's

madness can best be understood by realizing that the difficulty lies in two separate directions. First, there is the problem of definition. Differences of opinion abound about what constitutes 'madness,' so much so that commentators generally avoid using the term. The philosopher Santayana grants Hamlet might be irrational, "He acts without reflection, as he reflects without acting" but, Santayana says, this is not madness because his intellect remains clear.²³ More recently, Doctors Stern and Whiles have diagnosed Hamlet's symptoms as a "ganzer state," that is:

a particular psychotic manifestation in which the patient is insane but does not know it, and feigns insanity, giving "crooked" answers to questions.²⁴

Not clear about what madness consists of Eliot sits on the fence proposing that "it is less than madness and more than feigned."²⁵ Bradley, too, who has a more comprehensive idea about what is troubling Hamlet, equivocates on this issue. It is "not yet insanity," Bradley states, yet "not far from insanity;" Hamlet has adopted the pretense of madness, yet "If we like to use the word 'disease' loosely, Hamlet's condition must truly be called diseased which no exertion of will could have expelled."²⁶

Accompanying his hedging, however, Bradley proposes that Hamlet has a condition that is symptomatic of a profound neurosis and perhaps one that even borders on psychosis. Hamlet has a "pathological condition." His problem is "one of disgust at life and everything in it, himself included."²⁷ This condition, characterized by an inclination to nervous instability, to rapid and extreme changes in feeling and mood, Bradley identifies as melancholy.²⁸ Bradley's diagnosis is supported by Machenzie who points out that the weakness and irresolution that Hamlet exhibits are characteristics of the disease.²⁹ According to Bradley, with whom the idea of melancholy has become largely identified, the cause of Hamlet's melancholy is:

the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was

aching with love, and his body was doubtless weakened by sorrow.³⁰

Is Bradley's 'melancholy' madness? I believe that it is if we can agree on a definition that identifies madness as any condition which causes a general breakdown in the relation between the self and the world and which, because of that breakdown, disposes one to inauthentic forms of human behavior: either inaction or its opposite, the compulsory enactment of rituals or roles that are not reflective of the natural order of things. Thus Eric Erickson's idea that Hamlet is undergoing an "identity crisis" in a world that gives him nothing to be faithful to can be understood as madness, since the crisis causes an "identity diffusion" in the form of "playacting" at several roles.³¹

The second difficulty clouding the question of Hamlet's madness, as well as many of the other popular explanations about why Hamlet delays the revenge, is that Hamlet's condition is understood as simple and static, that is, as having only one cause and unchanging. But Mackenzie has rightly observed that "Of all the characters of Shakespeare that of Hamlet has been generally thought the most difficult to be reduced to any fixed or settled principle;"³² and when we consider the evidence of the text we find it supports not one but many theories about Hamlet's delay and it gives evidence both in defense of and in opposition to each of those theories. This should not be construed, however, as a weakness. Shakespeare's contemporary Montaigne knew that:

we are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapeless, and diverse a contexture, that every peece and every moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves, as there is between our selves and others.³³

If, as has been already suggested, the play is realistic, and if Hamlet is an imitation of a real person, then he should be presented as a complex, changing entity living in a complex, changing world. It's for this reason that Norman Holland

insists that a reading of the play is most useful if it places emphasis on a dynamic Hamlet, rather than on a series of static attitudes.³⁴

This is the view of Hamlet's character that I propose to take in this essay. It is a view that will permit an investigation of Hamlet which allows most of the various popular explanations for his delay to take their places as constituent parts of a more comprehensive understanding of the character, as well as allow for a consideration of the existential realities out of which the character develops.

Let us begin with Hamlet's melancholy and see how it might interact, as cause, effect, in or some other way, with other problems readers have observed in Hamlet. Freud's identification of the characteristics of melancholy is useful here. He notes that:

The distinguishing features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regardings to a degree that finds utterance in self reproaches and self-revilings.³⁵

Goddard adds to this by suggesting a generic cause. Melancholy is a sign that a man is living or trying to live a miscast, partial or obstructed life; one that is functioning "against the grain of his nature."³⁶ But what is "the grain" of Hamlet's nature? Since some of the characteristics of melancholy are already present when we first meet Hamlet (I . ii), the melancholy must be an effect of another more prior problem or problems that are in conflict with the situation that Hamlet now finds himself in, namely, his having recently lost his father. At least this is what we expect to find when we hear him deliver his first self-analyzing soliloquy (I . ii .129-59).

An examination of the soliloquy, however, reveals something quite different. What we find is a person troubled by quite a different situation and that situation is so distasteful, so difficult for Hamlet to admit to, so accompanied by anguish, that it

meets with great waves of resistance as it emotionally forces its way into his consciousness.

After an opening atatement which exhibits a suicidal depression, Hamlet resorts to an allusion of the mythic Garden of Eden as it might have appeared after the Fall. The cause of his depression is something that he wishes to mythologize and, thereby, to distance himself from by generalizing about it as a universal, impersonal event that took place long ago and far away. Yet laboring under a need to purge himself emotionally he replaces that mythic situation with something closer: "That it should come to this!" His father's death? No, something else. Something that Hamlet can not bring himself to face. He distances himself from it again. He speaks obliquely about his mother. Resisting the truth again, he questions the need to remember. Yet the cathartic impulse continues and the distance between him and the event which he does not wish to recognize decreases. It's something that has happened within the past two months. "Nay, not so much, not two." No, still less, within "a little month." Slowly he circles ever closer towards recognition, but, in an internal struggle like that of two enemies in the heat of battle who first take then give up small pieces of ground, he once again retreats. "Let me not think on't." While moving still closer to identifying the nature of the problem he once again displaces the source of his anguish with a generalized impersonal outcry: "Frailty, thy name is woman."

After many false starts, short breaths and hesitations, an emotional awareness breaks through his attempts to resist and he focuses upon the difficulty: his mother has married with his uncle. Yet this realization blinds him once again. With more resistance he tries to backtrack. The marriage has happened no longer within "a little month" but "Within a month." And again, with more resistance there must be more recognition to come; and finally it does come.

She married- O most wicked speed! To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (I . ii .156-7)

His mother's sexual activity. This is the "this" which Hamlet at last has come to recognize. With this final emotional recognition of the immediate source of his melancholy, a moment of catharsis paralleled only by few other such moments in the entire history of drama, a final resistance to the recognition brings the matter to a close. Having unpacked his heart with words, at least for the time being, he can now hold his tongue and retreat into the enigmatic face of his melancholia.

While he exhibits a modern self-consciousness in this first soliloquy, Hamlet is no Freud. On many occasions throughout the play he will struggle towards self-recognition as he does in this first soliloquy, yet each time what will rise to the surface will be the emotional vehicle isolated from the ultimate cause of the problem. Because of this the play raises more questions than gives answers. Why is Hamlet disturbed specifically by his mother's sexual activity rather than by the more general love she now bears for Claudius or by the more general socially shameful occasion of that love, her remarriage? Why does Hamlet feel that self-annihilation is necessary or desirable if his mother is the guilty party? Why does he have so demeaning an image of himself?

—married with my uncle,
My father's brother—but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. (I . ii .151-3)

Why will he be unable to do what he promises the Ghost: to taint not his mind nor let his soul contrive against his mother? Why, later, in the throes of anger after the performance of the "Murder of Gonzago," when he is intent on revenge and gorged with the desire to kill, will he be eager to go to his mother rather than to the King? Why does he exhibit such ambivalence in which one part of him tries to carry out the task given him by the Ghost while the other flinches inexorably from the thought of it?³⁷

Freud suggests an answer to many of these questions. "Hamlet is unable to take vengeance on the man who did away

with his father and took his father's place with his mother" because he is "the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized."³⁸ Clinical experience shows that every child wishes to murder his father and marry his mother. Clinical experience also shows that, under certain conditions, this childish wish persists in the unconscious mind of the adult from where it secretly exerts its influence upon the personality and results in a variety of symptoms, which may include severe depression or melancholy. Such a person can be considered to have what Freud called "the Oedipus Complex."

The genesis of the oedipus complex can be traced to specific intra-family relationships between parent and parent and between parent and child. The family which comprises a model oedipal constellation is one in which the mother is an emotionally needy person whose emotional needs are not met by her husband. In which case the mother turns her attention to and invests great quantities of her emotional energy in her child, providing him with large amounts of physical contact and, thus, sensual satisfaction. As a result of this, the child develops an inordinately strong attachment to the mother and, for the sake of continued satisfaction, wishes to have total and continuous possession of her. On the other hand, in this particular situation and for what might be a variety of reasons, the father remains somewhat aloof not only from the mother but also from the child. In such a scenario the child does not develop an adequately strong consciousness of the father as an unbeatable rival for the mother's attention; and the vehement cathexis for the mother is allowed to go relatively unchecked. The childishly unmodified desire for absolute and total possession of the mother, however, can never be realized; and, to avoid the painful consciousness of frustration the child represses consciousness of the situation. This, like Oedipus in the Sophocles drama from which Freud drew the name of this theory, the child, as an adult, is plagued by outcomes of his cathexis for the mother, yet all the time he remains unconscious of the cause of these effects.

Turning our attention to Hamlet, first let us inquire what evidence the play presents or suggests about the inter-personal relationships in Hamlet's immediate family, in order to see if they might constitute a causal setting for an oedipus complex. We are directly told so little about those relationships in the play, however, that we are obliged to follow Polonius' advice and "By indirection find direction out." What we do know about Hamlet's father is that he was primarily concerned with war.³⁹ Even in death as the Ghost he appears armored and ready for battle. Like Theseus in Euripides play *Hippolytus*, such a person spends his psychic energy on acts of aggression rather than in sexual expression and is likely to leave the sexual-emotional needs of his spouse unsatisfied. From this we can conclude that Hamlet's father gave scant attention to his wife, Gertrude. Gertrude, on the other hand, appears to be a person who needs to express herself in loving ways. In Hamlet's first soliloquy we are told that his mother expressed great affection for his father: "she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on." (I . ii .143-5) Consideration of his father's implied aloofness and his mother's emotional needs suggests, among other things, why Gertrude is psychologically able to marry again so quickly after the death of her first husband, as well as why she would invest inappropriate amounts of attention on Hamlet when he was a child.

Second, what of Hamlet's relationship with his mother and his father? Under the spell of the Ghost's visitation Hamlet seems to have a strong emotional alliance to his father, but once he is no longer under the apprehension of that ghostly appearance, he gives scant attention to thoughts of his father. The case is radically different with his mother. When he becomes most alive, most emotionally excited, his thoughts invariably turn to his mother. Patently the best example of this is after Hamlet witnesses the King's reaction at "The Murder of Gonzago." In a furor of emotion he turns aside his purpose to take revenge upon Claudius whom he now is sure is the murderer and,

instead, takes great delight in the perception that by the production of the play he has additionally had some effect upon his mother who now wishes to see him:

Guild. The Queen, your mother, in most great affliction
of spirit, hath sent me to you.

Ham. You are welcome. ...

O wonderful son, that can so stonish a mother! But
is there no sequel at the heels of this mother's admiration?
Impart.

Guild. She desires to speak with you in her closet ere
you go to bed.

Ham. We shall obey, were she ten times our mother.

(III. ii .303-24)

We are also told something of Gertrude's affection for Hamlet when Claudius is planning Hamlet's death with Laertes. Hamlet's death must look like an accident because "The Queen his mother lives almost by his looks." (IV.vii.11-12) This contrasts sharply the fact that nowhere in the play is there ever mentioned any affection that Hamlet's father had for his son. Instead, what we perceive in Hamlet's first encounter with the Ghost are implications that Hamlet might not have loved his father. "If thou didst ever thy dear father love," the Ghost says conditionally; and Hamlet's replies ambiguously: "O God!" (I.v.23-4) The Ghost continues with a negative, conditional appeal:

And duller shouldst thou be than the weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe whart,
Wouldst thou not stir in this. (I.v.32-5)

These conditions and negative appeals signal us that Hamlet's father does not, in fact, expect his son's loyalty.⁴⁰

What we find, then, when examining the relationship of Hamlet's parents with each other, as well as with their son, is a classic example of the situation that induces an oedipus complex.

Persuant to the formation of the complex, which includes

repression of the entire matter, all effects of Hamlet's oedipal wishes would have been prevented from re-entering consciousness later because of the maturing of filial piety and other educative influences. Moreover, emotional eruptions of the repressed wish could be guarded against by a series of defence mechanisms which, while protecting him from undue stress, would also function as compromised outlets for his frustrated psycho-sexual energy. With the death of Hamlet's father, however, all this was changed. Ernest Jones explains:

The actual realization of his early wish in the death of his father at the hands of a jealous rival would have stimulated into activity these "repressed" memories, which would have produced, in the form of depression and other suffering, an obscure aftermath of his childhood conflict.⁴¹

Many readers have called attention to other elements in Hamlet's character or in the play that can be explained as the results of Hamlet's oedipal feelings. Recently Richard A. Lanham observed that Hamlet's paralysis is due to the fact that he lacks a serious central self.⁴² Francis Barker, who takes up the same idea, is worth noting at length. Referring to the conversation between Hamlet and Guildenstern after the production of "The Murder of Gonzago" (III. ii. 336-63) Barker notices that:

Hamlet offers a metaphor of himself, of his self, to Guildenstern who is an instrument, purely of the king, and signally lacking any form of interiority. Challenging Guildenstern to "pluck out the heart" of his mystery ... Hamlet gives him the recorder which he cannot play ... The hollow pipe is the refutation of the metaphysic of soul which the play signals but cannot realize. For Hamlet, in a sense doubtless unknown to him, is truly this hollow reed which will "discourse most eloquent music" but is none the less vacuous for that. At the center of Hamlet, at the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing.⁴³

While I do not subscribe to Barker's idea that the play

signals “the refutation of the metaphysic of soul” his comments seen from a psychological perspective are quite on target. Hamlet has no mystery because, as earlier pointed out, Hamlet is experiencing an “identity crisis;” and Hamlet is able to “discourse most eloquent music” because, like an instrument which can articulate the music of different composers, he is undergoing an “identity diffusion,” which enables him to play different parts with equal liquidity.

Hamlet’s lack of identity is readily understood as a result of his oedipus complex. In the early years of childhood the child absorbs his identity in large part from his sexually-like parent via the process of identification. As Wordsworth indicates in the “Immortality Ode” the child devotes himself to this “as if his whole vocation were endless imitation.” If, however, unresolved oedipal jealousy is present in the child, then the identification process is impeded. As a consequence he will age with no experientially arrived at identity and will become adult, like Hamlet, to playact at many roles, able to shift in and out of each of them so suddenly and with great ease that some will think, by his sudden changes, that he is mad.

Goethe may also be correct in attributing Hamlet’s paralysis to a feminine element in the man.⁴⁴ There is an oversensitivity and wavering hesitation in Hamlet’s personality that we come to recognize as more acutely feminine than masculine, but these qualities are not innate. They are also the result of the identification process and, ultimately, of the general configuration of the social role allotted to women by a culture. When they are present in a man the situation may also be explained by the oedipus complex. When identification is blocked by hostile feelings for the father, identification with the mother often results. The alternative identification serves two purposes: first, it allows the child to have some, albeit confused, sense of identity; and second, it allows the child to possess the mother not physically but psychologically.

The identification with the mother is one component in

an extremely complex relationship between the mother and child that is marked in general by an ambivalence also caused and promoted by the complex.⁴⁵ The son's unsatisfied longing for a mother who had betrayed him as an infant leads to both identification with her and retaliatory impulses against her.⁴⁶ Hence, the desire for the mother "spills over into its opposite and the woman becomes guilty for the affect which she provokes."⁴⁷ Thereafter, any situation which provides an excuse for emotional expression becomes an occasion for venting negative feeling against the mother. We saw this to be the case in Hamlet's first soliloquy; and it is apparent again in the first Ghost scene.

At the exit of the Ghost Hamlet works himself up into a fever pitch filled with exclamatory declaration. (I . v .92-106) He will remember what the Ghost has communicated to him. He will "wipe away all trivial, fond records" and the Ghost's commandment alone will live in his brain. "Yes, by heaven!" he concludes. But he immediately follows that outcry with another cry which does not logically follow: "O most pernicious woman!" This is precisely what the Ghost told him not to do. He had been urged to leave his mother to heaven, not, as he does, to think of her first when psychologically preparing himself to enact the revenge.

The same kind of irrational focusing on his mother occurs later in the play in a soliloquy he delivers after "The Murder of Gonzago." Armed with confirmation of his uncle's guilt he lapses first into an hysterical rhyme (III . ii .265-8) then emotionally into unrhymed metaphor (275-8). Presumably, now highly charged by what he has witnessed, he is ready to take his revenge upon the King. In the soliloquy that follows (III . ii .379-90) he excites himself further.

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

Yet once again his hysteria produces thoughts of his mother: "Soft, now to my mother." And these are thoughts against

which Hamlet must caution himself:

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.
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites.

Hamlet's choice of Nero with whom to compare himself is particularly revealing since we remember that Nero is famous not only for matricide but also for the incestuous relationship he had with his mother.

In the scene that follows, (III. iv), Hamlet goes to his mother's closet and despite his previous self admonition he comes close to matricide. Worked into a frenzy over his mother's sexual behavior he diverts his aggression from its true object and stabs with his sword at the rustling arras and Polonius behind it. It is incorrect to suggest Hamlet thinks he is killing the King. It is clear from his immediate reaction that his action is motivated by unconscious forces beyond his ken.⁴⁸ When asked by the Queen what he has done his immediate answer is "Nay, I know not." Then, consciously trying to offer a possible justification for his behavior, he inquires "Is it the King?" (Lines 25-6) No, it is not the King.

The degree to which he is compulsively focused on resentment of his mother's sexual life is revealed by what happens next. As far as we know this "tender and delicate prince" has just killed for the first time, yet the bloody deed does not seem to have the least ability to divert him unconsciously motivated intentions. Thus he disregards the body of the slain Polonius until he has completely vented his negative feelings towards his mother. His deepest concern is that she is:

Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty! (Lines 93-4);

and he adjures his mother to abstain from sexual encounters with the King. "Avoid what is to come," he says, "And do not spread the compost on the weeds / To make them ranker."

(Lines 152-4). And again: "Good night. But do not go to my uncle's bed." (Line 161)

The killing of Polonius in this scene bears a certain similarity to Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia elsewhere. Both instances may be understood as a transference of Hamlet's negative attitude towards his mother caused by the oedipus complex. Just as by hiding behind the arras in Gertrude's room Polonius conveniently became an object upon which Hamlet could vent his aggression towards his mother; so, too, Ophelia, by following her father's advice to guard herself against Hamlet's attentions, has provided Hamlet with the opportunity to displace the aggression he does not consciously wish to enact upon his mother onto the relatively innocent and unsuspecting Ophelia.

John Dover Wilson concurs, noting that it is clear from the nunnery scene (III. i) that Hamlet is thinking almost as much of his mother as of Ophelia.⁴⁹ Freud argues that the distaste for sexuality by Hamlet in this conversation with Ophelia fits in very well with his general understanding of Hamlet's oedipal character.⁵⁰ Hamlet's address of Ophelia as "nymph" (Line 89), is a word that ambiguously and insultingly combines the meanings of maiden and prostitute, just as the "nunnery" to which he would send her (Lines 121ff) may well have been translated by his obsession into its opposite, a brothel, which was a denotation in the slang of the time. The ambiguity of his language here indicates Hamlet's projection onto Ophelia of his ambivalent feelings about his mother. Like his mother, Ophelia is, on the one hand, "virginal, taboo, untouchable;" yet, on the other hand, at least as a spy "she is too readily available—but not for him."⁵¹

Goddard's objection to an oedipal interpretation of this scene is based on his notion that Hamlet could not have an oedipus complex because he has fallen in love with Ophelia (presumably before the play opened) and, furthermore, that Ophelia is a girl of very different temperament from his mother.⁵² Except for Ophelia's mad song which might be understood as a

projection of her own frustrated needs, the text reveals no sexual intimacy between Ophelia and Hamlet. His love for her, which he proclaims in the letter that Polonius reads to the King and Queen, as well as later in the graveyard scene, might be construed as nothing more than a romanticised love of the type that Chaucer satirizes in "The Knight's Tale." Certainly, as in that tale, Hamlet would have had to love Ophelia from afar since he was a student in Wittenberg until his father's death.

We can now turn our attention to what readers have told us about other troubling effects of Hamlet's oedipal situation. The first of these effects is introversion and intellection. The mistaken idea that 'thinking' is the principal cause of Hamlet's delay in revenging his father murder has gained widespread support. Coleridge saw that Hamlet was a world within himself.⁵³ In Hamlet, he says, Shakespeare:

intended to portray a person, in whose view, the external world, and all its incidents and objects, were comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only, when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind.⁵⁴

Hazlitt and Schlegel thought so too. "Hamlet's ruling passion is to think, not to act," Hazlitt says; "and any vague pretext that flatter this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes."⁵⁵ For Schlegel the play is "a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never ending meditation."⁵⁶ Yet neither Coleridge nor Hazlitt nor Schlegel, believing this to be the source of Hamlet's trouble, offer any reason why Hamlet should so thoughtful, channeling all of his energy into thinking and none into action.

Given an understanding of Hamlet's oedipal problem, we see the situation quite differently. Impeded by his unfulfilled desire for his mother he is unable to express himself sexually in the physical world of the body. His psychological energy is, therefore, diverted inward where it is either repressed into the

unconscious, from which it is likely to erupt later at times of emotional stress, or dissipated by being employed in intellectual processes. Thus, thinking is a way to work off psychic energy; and it also acts in several ways as a defence mechanism, which impedes rather than assists recognition of his problem. First,

Hamlet insists on fleeing into an illusion that he is free, that he chooses and thinks about his choice, as a defense against recognizing that he is not free at all, that his neurotic drive, that is, prevents him from acting at all.⁵⁷

The converse of this also proves the case. When he does act, as when he kills Polonius, he does so because he does it suddenly and impulsively without thinking.

Second, Hamlet uses thinking instead of action, what Karl Menninger calls "obsessional thinking," as a way to manage aggressive feelings too great for him to handle.⁵⁸ This concurs with what others have said. Fleiss comments that Hamlet's writing the Ghost's injunction down in his tables (I.v.107-10) is a substitute, a displacement for the real act.⁵⁹ Otto Rank believes that Hamlet employs a kind of word magic, that is, he expects to accomplish with words what he should be achieving by action.⁶⁰ In the soliloquy he delivers after the player's speech (II.ii.544-601) Hamlet is self-conscious enough to recognize that this is what he is doing. After working himself up into a frenzy of linguistic accusation against the King he stops, catches and accuses himself of unpacking his heart with words. Yet this realization does not permit him to break through to reality. "What would he do," Hamlet asks about the player, "Had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?" (Lines 554-6) Presumably, Hamlet is now ready to admit the need to act. But no! The answer he gives is that he would engage in still more word magic: "He would drown the stage with tears, And cleave the general ear with horrid speech. (Lines 556-7) Once again, he turns (Line 584) in an effort to transcend this defensive linguistic level, but the best he can do is plan a theatrical event which will include another speech.

Thus with a slippery circularity his soliloquy departs from and returns to the sphere of theatrical language.⁶¹

Third, Hamlet also uses language, the agent of his thought, in a variety of ways to distance himself from the real world of action. That has already been observed in his first soliloquy where he mythologizes the personal event (I . ii .135-7) to put space between himself and it. In his most famous soliloquy (III . i .56-90) he uses another tactic. By using a series of infinitives: "To be," "to die," "to sleep" "to dream" he effectively removes the question and the action from the real world of time and his person. Another linguistic tactic Hamlet's uses to avoid reality is the pun. According to Coleridge it is the nature of thought to be indefinite;⁶² and nowhere is this more true than in Hamlet's constant verbal companion, the pun. By means of the pun Hamlet is able to overload words with double meanings, thus insuring that no one meaning can be definitely meant. This, too, is a kind of word magic, a word game, like a theatrical event, that keeps language in its place, in the mind, and outside of the sphere of action.

Thus Hamlet's thinking with its linguistic consequences, as well as his madness, which are problems in and of themselves, may be understood to be both produced by and supportive of his oedipal feelings. Together they cause a strong inhibition against doing what the Ghost commands. But that is not all. Both his oedipal feelings and his introverted thinking, sometimes singly and sometimes jointly, cause more problems which further strengthen his inhibitions and divorces him still further from the world in which he live. Yet in the midst of that world, hidden behind most unglamorous appearances, there exists an authority powerful enough to resolve all of Hamlet's problems.

(To be continued.)

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