
Psychopathic Characters on the Stage

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THE TDR DOCUMENT SERIES

Edited by Barnard Hewitt

ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ACTING

Acting is the most self-conscious of the arts. Of necessity it must be. But precious little has been done by theatre people to explore those vast depths of the unconscious from whence the mimetic instincts spring. Without such exploration, we shall never be able—if we ever can—to understand the histrionic sensibility. Our theatre needs such understanding, and it is hoped that these three controversial essays by eminent psychiatrists on the nature of character and characterization in the theatre will suggest directions that people more directly a part of the theatre can take.

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Psychopathic Characters on the Stage

By SIGMUND FREUD

If the function of the drama, as has been assumed since Aristotle, is to excite pity and fear, and thus bring about a 'catharsis of the emotions,' we may describe this same purpose a little more fully if we say that the question is one of opening up sources of pleasure and enjoyment from within the sphere of life, just as wit and the comic do from within the sphere of the intellect, through the action of which many such sources had been made inaccessible. Certainly the release of the subject's own affects must here be given first place, and the enjoyment resulting therefrom corresponds on the one hand to the relief produced by their free discharge, and on the other, very likely, to the concomitant sexual stimulation which, one may suppose, occurs as a by-product of every emotional excitation and supplies the subject with that feeling of a heightening of his psychic level which he so greatly prizes. The sympathetic witnessing of a dramatic performance fulfills the same function for the adult as does play for the child, whose besetting hope of being able to do what the adult does, it gratifies. The spectator at the play experiences too little; he feels like a 'Misero, to whom nothing worth while can happen'; he has long since had to moderate, or better direct elsewhere, his ambition to occupy a central place in the stream of world events; he wants to

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feel, to act, to mold the world in the light of his desire—in short, to be a hero. And the playwright-actors make all this possible for him by giving him the opportunity to identify himself with a hero. But they thus spare him something also; for the spectator is well aware that taking over the hero's rôle in his own person would involve such griefs, such sufferings and such frightful terrors as would almost nullify the pleasure therein; and he knows too that he has but a single life to live, and might perhaps perish in a single one of the hero's many battles with the Fates. Hence his enjoyment presupposes an illusion; it presupposes an attenuation of his suffering through the certainty that in the first place it is another than himself who acts and suffers upon the stage, and that in the second place it is only a play, whence no threat to his personal security can ever arise. It is under such circumstances that he may indulge in the luxury of being a hero; he may give way unashamedly to suppressed impulses such as the need for freedom in religious, political, social or sexual respects, and may let himself go in all directions in each and every grand scene of the life enacted upon the stage.

These are prerequisites for enjoyment, however, which are common to several forms of creative art. Epic poetry subserves above all the release of intense but simple feelings—as does, in its sphere, the dance; the epic poem may be said to make possible the enjoyment in particular of the great heroic personality in his triumphs; drama, however, is supposed to delve deeper into emotional possibilities, to manage to transform even the forebodings of doom into something enjoyable, and it therefore depicts the embattled hero rather with a masochistic satisfaction in succumbing. In fact, one might characterize drama by this very relation to suffering and misfortune, whether as in the play mere apprehension is aroused and then allayed, or as in tragedy actual suffering is brought into being. The origin of drama in sacrificial rites (goat and scapegoat) in the cult of the gods cannot be without appositeness to this meaning of drama; it assuages as it were the beginning revolt against the divine order which decreed the suffering. The hero is at first a rebel against God or the divine; and it is from the feeling of misery of the weaker creature pitted against the divine might that pleasure may be said to derive, through masochistic gratification and the direct enjoyment of the personage whose greatness nevertheless the drama emphasizes. This is the Prometheus attitude of man, who in a spirit of petty compliance would be soothed for the time being with a merely momentary gratification.

All varieties of suffering are therefore the theme of drama, which promises to create out of them pleasure for the spectator; whence arises the first condition which this art form must fulfill, that it shall cause the spectator no suffering, and that it must know how to compensate by means of the gratifications which it makes possible for the pity which it arouses—a rule against which modern dramatists have particularly often been offenders. But this suffering is soon restricted to mental anguish only, for nobody wants to witness physical suffering who knows how soon the bodily sensations thus stimulated put an end to all mental enjoyment. He who is ill has but one desire: to get well, to get over his condition; the doctor must come with his medicine; the arresting of the play of fantasy must cease—that arrest which has spoiled us to the extent of letting us extract enjoyment even out of our suffering. When the

spectator puts himself in the place of the sufferer from physical illness, he finds nothing within himself of enjoyment or of psychological give and take; and it is on this account that a person physically ill is possible on the stage only as a property, but not as the hero—excepting as some particular psychic aspect of illness is susceptible of psychic elaboration, as for example the abandoning of the sick Philoctetes, or the hopelessness of the sick in the plays of Strindberg.

Mental suffering we recognize, however, chiefly in relation to the circumstances out of which it has developed; hence drama requires an action from which this suffering derives, and begins by introducing to the audience this action. It is only an apparent exception that such plays as *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* present mental suffering as already in existence, for because of the familiarity of the matter to the audience the curtain always rises in the Greek drama in the middle of the play, as it were. Now, it is easy to define the conditions which this action must fulfill. There must be a play of contending forces; the action must contain within itself a striving of the will and some opposition thereto. The first and most grandiose fulfilling of these conditions was exemplified in the struggle against divinity. It has already been said that the essence of this tragedy is revolt, with dramatist and spectator taking sides with the rebel. The less that is then ascribed to the divine, the more accrues to the human element, which, with ever increasing insight, is made responsible for suffering; and so the next struggle, that of the hero against the social community, becomes the social tragedy. Still another fulfilling of these conditions is seen in the struggle between men themselves, that is, the character drama, which contains within itself all the characteristics of the agon, and, enacted preferably between outstanding personalities freed from the restrictions of human institutions, must accordingly have more than one hero. Combinations of these two are of course perfectly permissible, in the form of a struggle on the part of the hero against institutions of which strong characters are the embodiment. The pure drama of character is lacking in the sources of enjoyment afforded by the theme of rebellion, which in social plays, such as those of Ibsen, is again as powerfully to the fore as in the historical plays of Greek classical times. If religious, character, and social drama differ from one another chiefly with respect to the arena in which the action takes place from which the suffering has its origin, we may now follow the drama to still another arena, where it becomes the psychological drama. For it is within the soul of the hero himself that there takes place an anguished struggle between various impulses—a struggle which must end, not with the downfall of the hero, but with that of one of the contending impulses, in other words, with a renunciation. Every combination of this situation with that in the earlier type of drama, that is the social and the character drama, is of course possible in so far as social institutions evoke just such an inner conflict, and so on. It is here that the love drama belongs, in so far as the suppressing of love—whether on the score of the mores, the conventions or the conflict, familiar from opera, between 'love and duty'—forms the starting point for an almost endless variety of conflictual situations, as infinite in their variety as the erotic daydreams of mankind. The possibilities multiply still further, however, and the psychological drama becomes the psychopathological, when the source of

the suffering which we are to share and from which we are to derive pleasure is no longer a conflict between two almost equally conscious motivations, but one between conscious and repressed ones. Here the precondition for enjoyment is that the spectator shall also be neurotic. For it is only to him that the release and, to a certain extent, the conscious recognition of the repressed motivation can afford pleasure, instead of making merely for unacceptance. In the non-neurotic this will meet only with unacceptance, and will induce a readiness to repeat the act of repression, for in his case the latter has been successful. The repressed impulse is kept in complete counterbalance by the original force of repression. In the neurotic, on the other hand, repression is by way of failing; it is unstable, and requires ever renewed effort, an effort which is spared by recognition. It is only in the neurotic that such a struggle exists as can become the subject of drama; but in him also the dramatist will create not only the pleasure derived from release but resistance as well.

The foremost modern drama of this kind is *Hamlet*, which deals with the theme of a normal man who, because of the particular nature of the task enjoined upon him, becomes neurotic—a man in whom an impulse hitherto successfully repressed seeks to assert itself. *Hamlet* is distinguished by three characteristics which seem of importance to our discussion: 1) that the hero is not psychopathic, but becomes so only in the course of the action we are going to witness; 2) that the repressed desire is one of those that are similarly repressed in all of us, the repression of which belongs to an early stage of our individual development, while the situation arising in the play shatters precisely this repression. Because of these two features it is easy for us to recognize ourselves in the hero. For we are victims of the same conflict as is he; since 'he who doesn't lose his reason under certain provocations has no reason to lose.' 3) But it appears to be one of the prerequisites of this art form that the struggle of the repressed impulse to become conscious, recognizable though it is, is so little given a definite name that the process of reaching consciousness goes on in turn within the spectator while his attention is distracted and he is in the grip of his emotions, rather than capable of rational judgment. In this way resistance is definitely reduced, in the manner seen in psychoanalytic treatment, when the derivatives of the repressed ideas and emotions come to consciousness as a result of a lessening of resistance in a manner denied to the repressed material itself. And indeed the conflict in *Hamlet* is so deeply hidden that at first I could only surmise it.

Possibly it is because of the disregarding of these three requisite conditions that so many other psychopathic characters become as useless for the stage as they are for life itself. For the sick neurotic is to us a man into whose conflict we can obtain no insight (empathy) when he presents it to us in the form of the finished product. Conversely, if we are familiar with this conflict, we forget that he is a sick man, just as when he becomes familiar with it he himself ceases to be sick. It is thus the task of the dramatist to transport us into the same illness—a thing best accomplished if we follow him through its development. This will be particularly needful when the repression is not already existent in ourselves and must therefore be effected *de novo*—which represents a step beyond

Hamlet in the utilization of neurosis upon the stage. Where the full-blown and strange neurosis confronts us, in real life we call the physician and deem the person in question unsuitable as a stage figure.

In general, it may perhaps be said that the neurotic liability of the public, and the art of the dramatist in making use of resistances and supplying forepleasure, alone determine the limits of the utilization of abnormal characters upon the stage.

Translated by Henry Alden Bunker

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On Acting

By OTTO FENICHEL

Adversaries of psychoanalysis sometimes state that psychoanalysis, in investigating a psychological field, cannot do anything but name the instincts which are supposed to be at the basis of the field in question. That is certainly not true. No analyst was ever of the opinion that the significance of a given phenomenon, for example as "oral" or "anal," suffices to explain the phenomenon; and psychoanalysis does not study instincts only, but the dynamic interrelations between instincts and the outer world, or between instincts and counterforces from the outer world.

Nevertheless, the question of what instincts (erogenous zones, or partial instincts) form the basis of a given phenomenon actually is a good starting point for a psychoanalytic investigation. Sometimes the "counterforces" and the ways in which they work can be better directly approached with the help of an understanding of the nature of the instincts against which they are directed.

Concerning *acting*, there is no doubt about the nature of the underlying basic partial instinct: it is *exhibitionism*. Therefore, let us start with a few remarks about exhibitionism.

Exhibitionism is a sexual partial instinct. It is normally present in all children, and it forms a characteristic part of sexual forepleasure. Its aim is to present the body, or especially the excited erogenous zones and their functions, to onlookers.¹ With the establishment of infantile genital primacy, the wish to show the genitals is certainly in the foreground in the exhibitionism of children of both sexes. Later the differences in the development of the castration complex in the two sexes determines a corresponding difference in the development of exhibitionism. Male exhibitionism remains concentrated on the genitals; therefore it is apt to give reassurance against castration fear. In this way, the partial instinct

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