

Excerpts from Ernest Jones' Essay: **THE OEDIPUS-COMPLEX AS AN EXPLANATION OF HAMLET'S MYSTERY: A STUDY IN MOTIVE**

The particular problem of Hamlet, with which this paper is concerned, is intimately related to some of the most frequently recurring problems that are presented in the course of psychoanalysis, and it has thus seemed possible to secure a new point of view from which an answer might be offered to questions that have baffled attempts made along less technical routes. Some of the most competent literary authorities have freely acknowledged the inadequacy of all the solutions of the problem that have up to the present been offered, and from a psychological point of view this inadequacy is still more evident. The aim of the present paper is to expound an hypothesis which Freud some nine years ago suggested in one of the footnotes to his *Traumdeutung*¹; so far as I am aware it has not been critically discussed since its publication.

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The central mystery in [the play Hamlet], namely the cause of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for the murder of his father. . . has given rise to a regiment of hypotheses, and to a large library of critical and controversial literature . . . The most important hypotheses that have been put forward are subvarieties of three main points of view. The first of these sees the difficulty in the performance of the task in Hamlet's temperament, which is not suited to effective action of any kind; the second sees it in the nature of the task, which is such as to be almost impossible of performance by any one; and the third in some special feature in the nature of the task which renders it peculiarly difficult or repugnant to Hamlet.

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The first of these views, which would trace the inhibition to some defect in Hamlet's constitution, was independently elaborated more than a century ago by Goethe, Schlegel and Coleridge . . . It essentially maintains that Hamlet, for temperamental reasons, was fundamentally incapable of decisive action of any kind. There are at least three grave objections to this view of Hamlet's hesitancy, one based on general psychological considerations and the others on objective evidence furnished by the play.

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Attempts to attribute Hamlet's general aboulia² to less constitutional causes, such as to grief due to the death of his father and adultery of his mother, are similarly inefficacious, for psychopathology has clearly demonstrated that such grief is in itself quite inadequate as an explanation of this condition.

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Unequivocal evidence of the inadequacy of the hypothesis under

discussion may further be obtained from perusal of the play. In the first place there is every reason to believe that, apart from the task in question, Hamlet is a man capable of very decisive action. This could be not only impulsive, as in the killing of Polonius, but deliberate, as in the arranging for the death of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. His biting scorn and mockery towards his enemies, and even towards Ophelia, his cutting denunciation of his mother, his lack of remorse after the death of Polonius, are not signs of a gentle, yielding or weak nature. His mind was as rapidly made up about the organisation of the drama to be acted before his uncle, as it was resolutely made up when the unpleasant task had to be performed of breaking with the uncongenial Ophelia. He shews no trace of hesitation when he stabs the listener behind the curtain, when he makes his violent onslaught on the pirates, leaps into the grave with Laertes or accepts his challenge to the fencing match, or when he follows his father's ghost on to the battlements; nor is there any lack of determination in his resolution to meet the ghost; . . .

On none of these occasions do we find any sign of that paralysis of doubt which has so frequently been imputed to him. On the contrary, not once is there any sort of failure in moral or physical courage except only in the matter of the revenge. In the second place, as will later be expounded, Hamlet's attitude is never that of a man who feels himself not equal to the task, but rather that of a man who for some reason cannot bring himself to perform his plain duty.

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The second view here discussed goes in fact to the opposite extreme, and finds in the difficulty of the task itself the sole reason for the non-performance of it . . . [This view] maintains that the extrinsic difficulties inherent in the task were so stupendous as to have deterred any one, however determined.

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The argument . . . runs as follows: The nature of Claudius' crime was so frightful and so unnatural as to render it incredible unless supported by a very considerable body of evidence. If Hamlet had simply slain his uncle, and then proclaimed, without a shred of supporting evidence, that he had done it to avenge a fratricide, the nation would infallibly have cried out upon him, not only for murdering his uncle to seize the throne himself, but also for selfishly seeking to cast an infamous slur on the memory of a man who could no longer defend his honour. This would have resulted in the sanctification of the uncle, and so the frustration of the revenge. In other words it was the difficulty not so much of the act itself that deterred Hamlet as of the situation that would necessarily result from the act.

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If Hamlet is a man capable of action, and the task is one capable of

achievement, what then can be the reason that he does not execute it? Critics who have realised the inadequacy of the above-mentioned hypotheses have been hard pressed to answer this question. . . .

We are compelled then to take the position that there is some cause for Hamlet's vacillation which has not yet been fathomed. If this lies neither in his incapacity for action in general, nor in the inordinate difficulty of the task in question, then it must of necessity lie in the *third* possibility, namely in some special feature of the task that renders it repugnant to him. This conclusion, that Hamlet at heart does not want to carry out the task, seems so obvious that it is hard to see how any critical reader of the play could avoid making it. . . .

The obvious question that one puts to the upholders of any of the above hypotheses is: why did Hamlet in his monologues give us no indication of the nature of the conflict in his mind? As we shall presently see, he gave several excuses for his hesitancy, but never once did he hint at any doubt about what his duty was in the matter. He was always clear enough about what he *ought* to do; the conflict in his mind ranged about the question why he couldn't bring himself to do it. If Hamlet had at any time been asked whether it was right for him to kill his uncle, or whether he definitely intended to do so, no one can seriously doubt what his instant answer would have been. Throughout the play we see his mind irrevocably made up as to the necessity of a given course of action, which he fully accepts as being his bounden duty; . . .

[I]n no other way can the difficulty be logically met, and further, that in the recognition of Hamlet's non-consciousness of the cause of the repugnance to his task we are nearing the core of the mystery. But an invincible difficulty in the way of accepting any of the causes of repugnance suggested above is that the nature of them is such that a keen and introspective thinker, as Hamlet was, would infallibly have recognised them, and would have openly debated them instead of deceiving himself with a number of false pretexts in the way we shall presently mention.

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Thus Hamlet's hesitancy may have been due to an internal conflict between the need to fulfill his task on the one hand, and some special cause of repugnance to it on the other; further, the explanation of his not disclosing this cause of repugnance may be that he was not conscious of its nature; and yet the cause may be one that doesn't happen to have been considered by any of the upholders of the hypothesis. In other words the first two stages in the argument may be correct, but not the third. This is the view that will now be developed, but before dealing with the third stage in the argument it is first necessary to establish the probability of the first two, namely that Hamlet's hesitancy was due to some special cause of repugnance for his task, and that he was unaware of the nature of this repugnance.

A preliminary obstruction to this line of thought, based on some

common prejudices on the subject of mental dynamics, may first be considered. If Hamlet was not aware of the cause of his inhibition, doubt may be felt as to the possibility of our penetrating to it. . . . Fortunately for our investigation, however, psycho-analytic study has proved beyond doubt that mental trends hidden from the subject himself may come to external expression in a way that reveals their nature to a trained observer, so that the possibility of success is not to be thus excluded.

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That Hamlet is suffering from an internal conflict, the essential nature of which is inaccessible to his introspection, is evidenced by the following considerations. Throughout the play we have the clearest picture of a man who sees his duty plain before him, but who shirks it at every opportunity, and suffers in consequence the most intense remorse. To paraphrase Sir James Paget's famous description of hysterical paralysis: Hamlet's advocates say he cannot do his duty, his detractors say he will not, whereas the truth is that he cannot will. Further than this, the defective will-power is localised to the one question of killing his uncle; it is what may be termed a *specific aboulia*. Now instances of such specific aboulias in real life invariably prove, when analysed, to be due to an unconscious repulsion against the act that cannot be performed. In other words, whenever a person cannot bring himself to do something that every conscious consideration tells him he should do, it is always because for some reason he doesn't want to do it; this reason he will not own to himself and is only dimly if at all aware of. That is exactly the case with Hamlet. Time and again he works himself up, points out to himself his obvious duty, with the cruellest self-reproaches lashes himself to agonies of remorse, and once more falls away into inaction. He eagerly seizes every excuse for occupying himself with any question rather than the performance of his duty, just as on a lesser plane a schoolboy faced with a distasteful task whittles away his time in arranging his books, sharpening his pencils, and fidgeting with any little occupation that will serve as a pretext for putting off the task. Highly significant is the fact that the grounds Hamlet gives for his hesitancy are grounds none of which will stand a moment's serious consideration, and which continually change from one time to another.

One moment he pretends he is too cowardly to perform the deed or that his reason is paralysed by "bestial oblivion," at another he questions the truthfulness of the ghost, in another, when the opportunity presents itself in its naked form, he thinks the time is unsuited,-it would be better to wait till the king was in some evil act and then to kill him, and so on. When a man gives at different times a different reason for his conduct it is safe to infer that, whether purposely or not, he is concealing the true reason. . . .

The extensive experience of the psychoanalytic researches carried out by Freud and his school during the past twenty years has amply demonstrated

that certain kinds of mental processes shew a greater tendency to be "repressed" (ver- driangt) than others. In other words, it is harder for a person to own to himself the existence in his mind of some mental trends than it is of others. In order to gain a correct perspective it is therefore desirable briefly to enquire into the relative frequency with which various sets of mental processes are "repressed." One might in this connection venture the generalisation that those processes are most likely to be "repressed" by the individual which are most disapproved of by the particular circle of society to whose influence he has chiefly been subjected. Biologically stated, this law would run: "That which is unacceptable to the herd becomes unacceptable to the individual unit," it being understood that the term herd is intended in the sense of the particular circle above defined, which is by no means necessarily the community at large. It is for this reason that moral, social, ethical or religious influences are hardly ever "repressed," for as the individual originally received them from his herd, they can never come into conflict with the dicta of the latter. This merely says that a man cannot be ashamed of that which he respects; the apparent exceptions to this need not here be explained.

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The contrary is equally true, namely that mental trends "repressed" by the individual are those least acceptable to his herd; they are, therefore, those which are, curiously enough, distinguished as "natural" instincts, as contrasted with secondarily acquired mental trends . . .

It only remains to add the obvious corollary that, as the herd unquestionably selects from the "natural" instincts the sexual ones on which to lay its heaviest ban, so is it the various psycho-sexual trends that most often are "repressed" by the individual. We have here an explanation of the clinical experience that the more intense and the more obscure is a given case of deep mental conflict the more certainly will it be found, on adequate analysis, to centre about a sexual problem. On the surface, of course, this does not appear so, for, by means of various psychological defensive mechanisms, the depression, doubt, and other manifestations of the conflict are transferred on to more acceptable subjects, such as the problems of immortality, future of the world, salvation of the soul, and so on. Bearing these considerations in mind, let us return to Hamlet.

It should now be evident that the conflict hypotheses above mentioned, which see Hamlet's "natural" instinct for revenge inhibited by an unconscious misgiving of a highly ethical kind, are based on ignorance of what actually happens in real life, for misgivings of this kind are in fact readily accessible to introspection. Hamlet's self-study would speedily have made him conscious of any such ethical misgivings, and although he might subsequently have ignored them, it would almost certainly have been by the aid of a process of rationalisation which would have enabled him to deceive himself into

believing that such misgivings were really ill founded; he would in any case have remained conscious of the nature of them.

We must therefore invert these hypotheses, and realise that the positive striving for revenge was to him the moral and social one, and that the suppressed negative striving against revenge arose in some hidden source connected with his more personal, "natural" instincts. The former striving has already been considered, and indeed is manifest in every speech in which Hamlet debates the matter; the second is, from its nature, more obscure and has next to be investigated.

This is perhaps most easily done by inquiring more intently into Hamlet's precise attitude towards the object of his vengeance, Claudius, and towards the crimes that have to be avenged. These are two, Claudius' incest with the Queen, and his murder of his brother. It is of great importance to note the fundamental difference in Hamlet's attitude towards these two crimes. Intellectually of course he abhors both, but there can be no question as to which arouses in him the deeper loathing. Whereas the murder of his father evokes in him indignation, and a plain recognition of his obvious *duty* to avenge it, his mother's guilty conduct awakes in him the intensest horror . . .

Now, in trying to define Hamlet's attitude towards his uncle we have to guard against assuming offhand that this is a simple one of mere execration, for there is a possibility of complexity arising in the following way: The uncle has not merely committed each crime, he has committed both crimes, a distinction of considerable importance, for the combination of crimes allows the admittance of a new factor, produced by the possible inter-relation of the two, which prevents the result from being simply one of summation. In addition it has to be borne in mind that the perpetrator of the crimes is a relative, and an exceedingly near relative. The possible inter-relation of the crimes, and the fact that the author of them is an actual member of the family on which they were perpetrated, gives scope for a confusion in their influence on Hamlet's mind that may be the cause of the very obscurity we are seeking to clarify.

We must first pursue further the effect on Hamlet of his mother's misconduct. Before he even knows that his father has been murdered he is in the deepest depression, and evidently on account of this misconduct. The connection between the two is unmistakable in the monologue in Act I, Sc. 2, in reference to which Furnivall writes, "One must insist on this, that before any revelation of his father's murder is made to Hamlet, before any burden of revenging that murder is laid upon him, he thinks of suicide as a welcome means of escape from this fair world of God's, made abominable to his diseased and weak imagination by his mother's lust, and the dishonour done by her to his father's memory."

. . . If we ask, not what ought to produce such soul-paralysing grief and

distaste for life, but what in actual fact does produce it, we must go beyond this explanation and seek for some deeper cause. In real life speedy second marriages occur commonly enough without leading to any such result as is here depicted, and when we see them followed by this result we invariably find, if the opportunity for an analysis of the subject's mind presents itself, that there is some other and more hidden reason why the event is followed by this inordinately great effect. The reason always is that the event has awakened to increased activity mental processes that have been "repressed" from the subject's consciousness. His mind has been prepared for the catastrophe by previous mental processes, with which those directly resulting from the event have entered into association.

This is perhaps what Furnivall means when he speaks of the world being made abominable to Hamlet's "diseased imagination." Further, to those who have devoted much time to the study of such conditions the self-description given here by Hamlet will be recognised as a wonderfully accurate picture of a particular mental state that is often loosely and incorrectly classified under the name of "neurasthenia." Analysis of such states always reveals the operative activity of some forgotten group of mental processes, which on account of their unacceptable nature have been "repressed" from the subject's consciousness. Therefore if Hamlet has been plunged into this abnormal state by the news of his mother's second marriage it must be because the news has awakened into activity some slumbering memory, which is so painful that it may not become conscious. For some deep-seated reason, which is to him unacceptable, Hamlet is plunged into anguish at the thought of his father being replaced in his mother's affection by some one else. It is as though his devotion to his mother had made him so jealous for her affection that he had found it hard enough to share this even with his father, and could not endure to share it with still another man.

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The whole subject of jealousy in children is one which arouses such prejudice that even well-known facts are either ignored or are not estimated at their true significance. Stanley Hall in his encyclopaedic treatise makes a number of very just remarks on the importance of the subject in adolescents, but implies that before the age of puberty this passion is of relatively little consequence.

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Of the infantile jealousies the one with which we are here occupied is that experienced by a boy towards his father. The precise form of early relationship between child and father is in general a matter of vast importance in both sexes, and plays a predominating part in the future development of the child's character; this theme has been brilliantly expounded by Jung' in a recent essay. The only point that at present concerns us is the resentment felt

by a boy towards his father when the latter disturbs his enjoyment of his mother's affection. This feeling, which occurs frequently enough, is the deepest source of the world-old conflict between father and son, between the young and old, the favourite theme of so many poets and writers.

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[Freud] has shewn' that this instinct does not, as is generally supposed, differ from other biological functions by suddenly leaping into being at the age of puberty in all its full and developed activity, but that like other functions it undergoes a gradual evolution and only slowly attains the form in which we know it in the adult.

... There is a great variability in both the date and the intensity of the early sexual manifestations, a fact that depends partly on the boy's constitution and partly on the mother's. When the attraction exercised by the mother is excessive it may exert a controlling influence over the boy's later destiny.

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The attitude towards the successful rival, namely the father, also varies with the extent to which the aroused feelings have been "repressed." If this is only slight, then the natural resentment against the father may later on be more or less openly manifested, a rebellion which occurs commonly enough, though the original source of it is not recognised. To this source many social revolutionaries owe the original impetus of their rebellion against authority, as can often be plainly traced—for instance in Shelley's case. If the "repression" is more intense, then the hostility towards the father is also concealed; this is usually brought about by the development of the opposite sentiment, namely of an exaggerated regard and respect for him, and a morbid solicitude for his welfare, which completely cover the true underlying relation. The illustration of the attitude of son to parent is so transpicuous in the Œdipus legend, as developed for instance in Sophocles' tragedy, that the group of mental processes concerned is generally known under the name of the "Œdipus-complex."

We are now in a position to expand and complete the suggestions offered above in connection with the Hamlet problem. The story thus interpreted would run somewhat as follows: As a child Hamlet had experienced the warmest affection for his mother, and this, as is always the case, had contained elements of a more or less dimly defined erotic quality. The presence of two traits in the Queen's character go to corroborate this assumption, namely her markedly sensual nature, and her passionate fondness for her son. The former is indicated in too many places in the play to need specific reference, and is generally recognised. The latter is equally manifest; as Claudius says (Act IV, Sc. 7, l. 11), "The Queen his mother lives almost by his looks."

Now comes the father's death and the mother's second marriage. The

long "repressed" desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection is stimulated to unconscious activity by the sight of some one usurping this place exactly as he himself had once longed to do. More, this someone was a member of the same family, so that the actual usurpation further resembled the imaginary one in being incestuous. Without his being at all aware of it these ancient desires are ringing in his mind, are once more struggling to find expression, and need such an expenditure of energy again to "repress" them that he is reduced to the deplorable mental state he himself so vividly depicts. Then comes the Ghost's announcement of the murder. Hamlet, having at the moment his mind filled with natural indignation at the news, answers with (Act I. Sc. 5. 1. 29.),

"Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift As meditation or the thoughts of love, May sweep to my revenge."

The momentous words follow revealing who was the guilty person, namely a relative who had committed the deed at the bidding of lust. Hamlet's second guilty wish had thus also been realised by his uncle, namely to procure the fulfilment of the first—the replacement of his father—by a personal deed, in fact by murder. The two recent events, the father's death and the mother's second marriage, seemed to the world not to be causally related to each other, but they represented ideas which in Hamlet's unconscious fantasy had for many years been closely associated. These ideas now in a moment forced their way to conscious recognition in spite of all "repressing" forces, and found immediate expression in his almost reflex cry: "O my prophetic soul! My uncle?" For the rest of the interview Hamlet is stunned by the effect of the internal conflict in his mind, which from now on never ceases, and into the nature of which he never penetrates.

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He of course detests his uncle, but it is the jealous detestation of one evil-doer towards his successful fellow. Much as he hates him, he can never denounce him with the ardent indignation that boils straight from his blood when he reproaches his mother, for the more vigorously he denounces his uncle the more powerfully does he stimulate to activity his own unconscious and "repressed" complexes. He is therefore in a dilemma between on the one hand allowing his natural detestation of his uncle to have free play, a consummation which would make him aware of his own horrible wishes, and on the other ignoring the imperative call for vengeance that his obvious duty demands. He must either realise his own evil in denouncing his uncle's, or strive to ignore, to condone and if possible even to forget the latter in continuing to "repress" the former; his moral fate is bound up with his uncle's for good or ill. The call of duty to slay his uncle cannot be obeyed because it links itself with the call of his nature to slay his mother's husband, whether this is the first or the second; the latter call is strongly "repressed," and

therefore necessarily the former also. It is no mere chance that he says of himself that he is prompted to the revenge "by heaven and hell," though the true significance of the expression of course quite escapes him.

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Action is paralysed at its very inception, and there is thus produced the picture of causeless inhibition which is so inexplicable both to Hamlet and to readers of the play. This paralysis arises, however, not from physical or moral cowardice, but from that intellectual cowardice, that reluctance to dare the exploration of his inner mind, which Hamlet shares with the rest of the human race.