

Hamlet's Alleged Oedipal Complex

William Shakespeare's play Hamlet starts out as a straight forward revenge drama, which was a common genre during the time of Shakespeare's life. Early on in the play Hamlet learns from his father's ghost that his father has been murdered by his Hamlet's uncle Claudius. To make matters worse, Claudius has assumed the throne and married Hamlet's mother Gertrude. Upon hearing of the murder, Hamlet swears to avenge his father's death. However, Hamlet is unable to muster up the will to actually kill his uncle, and he begins behaving erratically. When a troop of actors shows up, Hamlet decides he must test the ghost's claim, so he writes a play that will expose Claudius as his father's murderer. His uncle's reaction to the play convinces Hamlet of his guilt, but when Hamlet has an opportunity to kill Claudius while the murderer is praying alone in the chapel, he creates an excuse for himself not to do it. Eventually Hamlet does kill Claudius, but it is not until Hamlet's mother Gertrude has died, and Hamlet has received a mortal wound himself from a poisoned blade. His odd behavior and his inability to avenge his father's murder have led many to speculate about the motivation behind Hamlet's actions.

Ernest Jones' critical analysis of Shakespeare's play addresses the strange conduct of the Hamlet and explains his behavior using Freudian psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud argued that sexuality begins in the infant stages of life and that a young boy experiences sexual desires for his mother, which causes the boy to see his father as a rival for his mother's affection. This desire for his mother will eventually become part of the boy's subconscious when he becomes an adult, and Freud called it the oedipal complex after the Greek myth about a man who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Jones suggests that Hamlet's oedipal complex is the cause of his erratic behavior and is the explanation for the reason why Hamlet has such a difficult time avenging his father's murder. It is simply Hamlet's subconscious sexual desire for his mother that prevents him from doing the deed. (Jones 70)

As evidence for Jones' interesting take on Hamlet's problem, he points to two traits possessed by the Queen. The first is Gertrude's unusual fondness for her son, which Claudius describes; "The Queen his mother lives almost by his looks." (Jones 80) More obvious is her sensuality, which Jones' suggests is evident throughout the play. Jones also finds evidence for Hamlet's oedipal complex in his relationship with Ophelia, who is a stark contrast to Gertrude. According to Jones this could either be an unconscious urge to suppress his desire for his mother, or it could an unconscious attempt to make his mother jealous, like when he dramatically expresses that he would rather sit with Ophelia at dinner during the play within a

play scene (Jones 81). Also, Jones points out that, in general, Hamlet's misogynist attitude towards Ophelia is indicative of the repressed emotions for his mother (Jones 86).

The most interesting argument that Jones makes is the explanation for Hamlet's inability to kill Claudius and avenge his father's murder. Hamlet's repressed unconscious sexual desire for his mother, as well as his lingering boyhood view of his father as a rival, is brought to the surface when he learns of the murder. In order to hide this fact from himself he is forced to mute his wrath towards his uncle, since Claudius merely acted out Hamlet's own secret longing. To Jones, this is why Hamlet is not able to kill Claudius until after Gertrude has already died and Hamlet has been mortally wounded, which allows him to disassociate his guilt from the act of vengeance (Jones 88). Inference to the best explanation is a useful way to determine if Jones has good evidence for his conclusion that Hamlet is suffering from an overblown oedipal complex. I will schematize the argument below:

- E1: Hamlet's inability to avenge his father
 - E2: Hamlet's close relationship with his mother
 - E3: Shakespeare's sensual characterization of Gertrude
 - E4: Hamlet's behavior toward Ophelia
 - E5: Freud's theories regarding the unconscious and the oedipal complex
 - E6: Revenge dramas were a popular genre during Shakespeare's life
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- T0: Hamlet has a repressed sexual desire for his mother

Not everyone who has criticized Shakespeare's Hamlet has reached the same conclusion as Jones. Poet, and literary critic, T.S. Eliot argues that Hamlet the character is not the issue. He says that critics should judge Hamlet the play as a work of art relative to other works of art instead of reading too much into the character. Critics like Goethe and Coleridge, he suggests, use their imaginations to create their own Hamlet character beyond what Shakespeare ever intended when they should criticize the play objectively without interpretation (Eliot 1). So in his own analysis of Hamlet, Eliot concludes that the play is a just a poor piece of art, and that the peculiarities seen in the title character result from Shakespeare's artistic failure (Eliot 2).

T.S. Eliot's central argument for why the play went wrong was that it was not originally Shakespeare's, but was adapted from earlier versions written by a series of contributing authors (Eliot 1). One of the clues that Eliot points to is the *Spanish Tragedy* written by Thomas Kyd. He explains that there are "verbal parallels"

between the two works that demonstrate that at least parts of Hamlet are simply just revisions of Kyd's play. Eliot also suggests that there are other scenes in the play that were not written by Kyd or Hamlet which do not fit, like the Polonius-Laertes and the Polonius-Reynaldo scenes (Eliot 2). Another criticism leveled by Eliot, is that Hamlet lacks an "objective correlative", or an external representation of the characters inner emotions. The play is missing this because Hamlet's emotional response to his mother's actions is much greater than what is called for, and therefore cannot be properly illustrated. Eliot reveals that Hamlet's madness is merely a ruse in previous versions of the play, which illustrates where Shakespeare went wrong in his own adaptation. In an attempt to make the play about the effect of Gertrude's guilt upon her son, Shakespeare adds his own touch to Hamlet's madness, which just ends up becoming "the buffoonery of an emotion that which can find no outlet in action." (Eliot 3) I can re-schematize the evidence cited by Jones along with the data contributed by Eliot's criticism as follows:

E1: through E6

E7: Verbal parallels with Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*

E8: Unexplained scenes in different style

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T'1: Hamlet is adapted from earlier works

E9: Hamlet's madness is feigned in previous incarnations

E10: Lack of an "objective correlative"

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T"1: Shakespeare unsuccessfully attempts to illustrate the effects of a mother's guilt upon her son

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T"'1: Hamlet fails as a work of art

There are other potential explanations for Hamlet's odd behavior as well. For instance, he could just be a cowardly individual, although the evidence does not point to this. The actual charge of assassinating his uncle may just be an extremely difficult undertaking to complete. Perhaps Hamlet really has just gone insane. Before I rank order the rival explanations, I need to include on more piece of relevant evidence. Upon learning of her own father, Polonius' death, Ophelia appears to descend into madness until she apparently commits suicide.

E11: Ophelia's insanity and suicide after father's death.

Given this last bit of evidence I believe that Shakespeare is really demonstrating Hamlet's very real descent into madness, which is brought about by the shock of learning of his father's murder and mother's betrayal. Ophelia's tragedy reflects a parallel to Hamlet's own fate, in that she experiences the same death of a father and quick onset of insanity. Also, Shakespeare's characterization of Hamlet as erratic and confused, does not hint at any ruse on Hamlet's part, given that his demeanor is also like this during his monologues. I have ranked all the rival conclusions below:

T4: Hamlet has genuinely gone mad

T3: The task itself is just very difficult

T0: Hamlet has a repressed sexual desire for his mother

T1: Hamlet fails as a work of art

T2: Hamlet is a coward

I ranked T.S. Eliot's conclusion fourth because I do not think the evidence he cites supports the claim that Hamlet is an artistic failure. Even if the suggestion that Hamlet had been mostly adapted by Shakespeare from older plays is accurate, it still does not follow that Hamlet did not turn out exactly how Shakespeare had intended. Eliot even seems to point this out himself when he indicates that "even hasty revision" should have noticed the problems with the play. If Shakespeare did not notice these problems, perhaps he did not consider them so problematic, and given that his play has captivated so many and been the object of such intense study that it can hardly be disqualified as art.

Jones' explanation is ranked third, because it is highly unlikely that Shakespeare was writing about the oedipal complex when Freud had not even been born yet. This means that Freud's theories are only relevant if Shakespeare himself understood them implicitly. This is hard to believe, and besides Hamlet there is no evidence that I am aware of that supports this. However, if Freud was truly onto something, it is possible that Shakespeare himself had a repressed oedipal complex and was expressing it unconsciously when he wrote Hamlet. It is an interesting idea, but I think that Jones has put his own spin onto Hamlet beyond what is likely. It is much more likely that Hamlet went crazy than that he was in love with his mother.

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Eliot, T.S.. "Hamlet and his Problems". *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 1922.

Jones, Ernest. "The Psycho-Analytical Solution." 1910.