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Freud on Shakespeare: An Approach to Psychopathic Characters

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Abstract

What happens when the fictional characters of Shakespeare are transformed from the stage/page to the analyst's couch? Sigmund Freud's interest in literature permeates all his work and much of his life. His lively and informative views on Shakespeare, scattered throughout his works, are indeed a fascinating topic. This paper attempts to trace Freud's analytical approach to Shakespeare in general and his observations of psychopathic characters in five plays—*Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*. While Freud refers to Shakespeare frequently in his writings, there is an obvious missing link in the Freudian Shakespeare; among Shakespeare's four major tragedies, he leaves *Othello* out. Aiming at filling out Freud's silence about a major Shakespeare play, I will attempt a short disquisition on *Othello*. The paper will end with an examination of psychoanalysis as a critical tool.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Freud, Psychoanalysis, Psychopathology, *Othello*

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1. Introduction

In a short, highly-condensed essay, “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” (1905), Sigmund Freud traces the development of western drama from Greek tragedy to his own time. Evoking Aristotle’s culturally laden idea of catharsis, Freud selects a different point of departure. He reinscribes the momentum of tragedy to arouse “terror and pity”¹ in the psychoanalytic terms which characterize all his writings. To address the cleansing effect experienced by audience members at the end of a tragedy, Freud reworks on the Aristotelian theory of poetics. “To purge the emotion,” he explicates, is a question of “opening up sources of pleasure or enjoyment in our emotional life” because of (1) the relief produced by a thorough discharge; (2) an accompanying sexual excitation (a raising of the potential of one’s psychical state) (1905: 305). Focusing on the shifting sites where conflict occurs, he outlines the development of drama. According to the terrain on which the action that leads to the suffering is fought out, Freud identifies five phases, of which the last is “*psychopathological* drama.”² Modern dramas in this category feature conflict which arises between a conscious impulse and a repressed one. The precondition for enjoyment is that the spectator should be a neurotic, because he can thus “derive pleasure from the revelation and recognition of a repressed impulse” (1905: 309). At this point, Freud marks out *Hamlet* as a model of characterizing a psychopathic figure.

Inspired by Freud’s comments on Shakespeare’s dramaturgy in his 1905 essay and his remarks on *Hamlet* in particular, this paper attempts to trace Freud’s interest in Shakespeare and the points he makes about particular plays and characters. While Freud refers to Shakespeare frequently in his writings, he leaves *Othello* out. Aiming at filling out Freud’s silence about a major Shakespeare play, I will attempt a disquisition of the Othello syndrome and then propose a reading of *Othello* informed by post-Freudian

¹ The German “*Mitleid*” which Freud used for “pity” has the meaning of “sympathetic suffering” (Freud, 1905: 305).

² The first four types are respectively (1) *religious* drama: rebellion against gods; (2) *social* drama: struggle against human society; (3) *character* drama: struggle between individual men; and (4) *psychological* drama: struggle between two almost equal conscious impulses which must end in the extinction of one of the impulses (1905: 305-309).

theories.

2. Freud on Shakespeare

What happens when the fictional characters of Shakespeare are transformed from the stage/page to the analyst's couch? Freud's views on Shakespeare, scattered through his works, are indeed a fascinating topic. Freud was highly regarded as a gifted writer and was recognized as such when he was awarded the Goethe Prize, Germany's highest literary award, in 1930. Freud's interest in literature permeates all his work. An early sign of his love for literature is found in his letters to Wilhelm Fliess, an intimate friend of his, in which Freud describes his dreams and relates them to various literary works (Freud, 1985).

Freud often treats a literary work as a portrayal of reality and attempts to explain the psychology of the characters portrayed. Besides his favorite German classics, Freud often refers to Shakespeare whom he began reading at the age of eight and could "recite at length in his near-perfect English" (Holland, 1960: 163; Gay, 1998: 166). His famous pages on and random references to Shakespeare often prove to be eye-openers for Shakespeare specialists who are interested in the human psyche. Collectively, they invite us to look at how the analyst diagnoses the Bard's characters through the therapeutic treatment known as psychoanalysis. Freud presents us with an unparalleled opportunity to see Shakespeare's characters not only "in our mind's eye" but also in flesh and blood and, in the process, to digest the familiar texts with fresh perspectives. I have selected for discussion five plays on which Freud made substantial analysis. They are *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Richard III*.

2.1 *Oedipus Rex and Hamlet*

In works of literature Freud discovers and confirms several clinical observations, the most perceptive being the Oedipus complex in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and his analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As Norman Holland points out, "it is almost as though these two plays guided him in his self-analysis" (1960: 165). He identifies the Oedipal relationship as a general event in early childhood which he thinks may explain "the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex* and perhaps *Hamlet*" (Gay, 1998: 100). In 1897

Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess and related his discovery of the Oedipus complex to the cleansing effect of *Oedipus Rex*:

Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state.

The enigma of Hamlet had long fascinated Freud. Now he was able to apply the concept to both plays:

From understanding this tragedy of destiny [*Oedipus Rex*] it was only a step further to understanding a tragedy of character—*Hamlet*, which had been admired for three hundred years without its meaning being discovered or its author's motives guessed. It could scarcely be a chance that this neurotic creation of the poet should have come to grief . . . over the Oedipus complex. (Letter to W. Fliess, 15 October 1897, in Freud, 1985; qtd. in 1989: 38)

However, Freud's first published discussion of *Hamlet* is in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Freud fully elaborates on the guilt feelings aroused in Hamlet by his incestuous desire for his mother and his wish to displace his father. He points out that in *Oedipus Rex* the wish is acted out while in *Hamlet* it is repressed. The play, as Freud argues, in bringing Hamlet's psychopathology up under numerous guises of poetry and drama, thus evades the superego and gives the audience's repressed desires a way to satisfy themselves imaginatively. The protagonist, haunted by an unresolved complex, invites analysis in himself, while the viewers, deeply moved, recognize in Hamlet's tragedy their own secret history. Claudius, in murdering Old Hamlet and marrying Gertrude, thus becomes the projection of Hamlet's own repressed desires. Furthermore, as Claudius is now Hamlet's stepfather, Hamlet may safely direct his own death wish against him without repression. Hence Claudius becomes the outward projection of the id which Hamlet may safely punish as though punishing himself for his illicit feelings toward his mother and against his father. Also, in killing Claudius, Hamlet is satisfying

(unconsciously) his own patricidal impulse (1900, *SE* 4: 264ff).

Freud revisits *Hamlet* in his essay “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage,” and cites the play as a classic example of dramatizing a psychopathological character. He attributes Shakespeare’s successful presentation to three reasons. (1) The hero is not psychopathic, but rather, *becomes* psychopathic in the course of the play. (2) The repressed impulse (Oedipus complex) is a conflict shared by all of us. (3) This impulse, struggling into consciousness, is never given a definite name. The spectators are carried through with their attention diverted and are in the grip of their emotions instead of examining what is happening (1905: 309). The last point Freud raises here seems to be an addition to his earlier analysis of *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. At the end of this short essay, Freud proudly states, “The conflict in *Hamlet* is so effectively concealed that it was left for me to unearth it” (1905: 310). Indeed, the Oedipus complex is a strategic center of Freud’s thinking, which he links to *Hamlet* and credits it for the play’s popularity. It is noteworthy that time and again Freud took pride in solving the mystery of *Hamlet*, of which “even Goethe has missed the mark” (Gay, 1998: 313).

Despite all his affection for literature, Freud is nevertheless more interested in secret hunting than in poetry: he treats the characters of fiction as true clinical cases. As Peter Gay, Freud’s biographer, observes: “All his life Freud felt under the pressure to penetrate secrets” (1998: 311). Freud considers literary creations and, generally, artistic creations enigmatic because of their ability to produce emotion in the spectator. Far from contenting himself with applying the psychoanalytic method to the analysis of works of art, Freud emphasizes the heuristic value of such works for the psychoanalytic study of the human psyche. The link between *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* is an essential key to the Freudian map of mental functioning and to a grand design for such a psychology. As Norman Holland rightly points out, Freud’s “most famous contribution to Shakespeare scholarship . . . was to point out Hamlet’s Oedipus complex.” On the other hand, *Hamlet* “seems almost to have helped Freud formulate the conception of Oedipus complex which turned out to be the cornerstone of orthodox psychoanalysis” (1960:165).

Hamlet’s Oedipus complex was further treated by Ernest Jones, Freud’s devoted disciple from Shakespeare’s native land. As early as 1910 when Jones sent him a paper

on this theme, Freud expressed great interest: “The suggestions made by me for the analysis of this tragedy were fully worked out later on by Ernest Jones” (1989: 38). Indeed, a fully fledged project on the same theme is found in Jones’s *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). This book is an extended footnote to Freud’s thought-provoking discussions on *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and a later essay “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” (1924). Jones’s work is a homage paid both to his mentor and also to the Bard. Even in the Shakespearean circle, this modern gloss on *Hamlet* has been received as a welcome addition to the play’s literature. Nobody can go back to *Hamlet* the same after an encounter with the Oedipal interpretation of the play. It triggers subtle changes in our perspective and our reception of *Hamlet*.

2.2 The Merchant of Venice and King Lear

While Freud comments on, refers to, and quotes from Shakespeare throughout his work, “The Theme of the Three Caskets” is the only paper in which he discusses two Shakespearean plays on a single motif. He reads both plays as the dramatist’s meditation on the role of women in a man’s life and death. At the beginning Freud calls our attention to two scenes from Shakespeare, in which the number three plays an essential role: First, the casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice* where *three* pretenders to Portia’s hand need to choose between *three* metal caskets; and second, the “love test” (or love contest) scene in *King Lear* where the aged King intends to divide his kingdom among his *three* daughters, according to the love each pledges for him. In each story, the humblest of the three is shown to be the most precious: the plain lead on one side, the speechless love of Cordelia on the other.

Freud finds that in *The Merchant of Venice* the choice a woman (Portia) has to make between three suitors is inverted (as in the logic of a dream) into the choice a man makes between three caskets, that is, three women. He examines the situation in which Bassanio is forced to choose between three caskets to win Portia, and, as if analyzing a dream, associates the caskets with “symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself” (1913: 292). Freud notes that in this scenario the choice reflects the character or nature of the *chooser*, not what is *chosen*. Freud wants to re-orient the choice toward the chosen object.

He considers what lies behind this situation of “*a man’s choice between three*

women.” In the case of *King Lear*, Freud argues, “an old man cannot very well choose between three women . . . Thus they become his daughters” (1913: 293). Seen in this way, the extraordinary premises of the love contest become intelligible: the dying old man “is not willing to renounce the love of women; he insists on hearing how much he is loved” (1913: 301). Freud assumes this motif of “a man’s choice between three women” must be indicative of some universal human problem; it must be an archetypal representation of something that lies deep within the human psyche (collective consciousness). Hence if we can understand the motif, we can understand something about this shared psyche. He compares Cordelia’s muteness to lead: “Cordelia makes herself unrecognizable, inconspicuous like lead, she remains dumb.” He quotes Bassanio’s remarks when choosing the casket of lead: “Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence.” To this saying Freud supplements, “Gold and silver are ‘loud’; lead is dumb—in fact like Cordelia, who ‘loves and is silent’ “ (1913: 295).

The motif of *three* (of which the third is mute) leads Freud to evoke other scenes that turn on the number *three* in myths and fairytales.³ Freud identifies the uniqueness of the third as her “dumbness,” and then recalls how dumbness in psychic life is typically a representation of death. Seen from this perspective, the third woman among whom the choice is made is “a dead woman . . . Death itself, the Goddess of Death” (1913: 296).

Freud reminds us that phantasy activity typically inverts what is disagreeable into its contrary. Though no man chooses death, “it is only by fatality that a man falls a victim to it (1913: 298). Fatality, through a wishful reversal, is replaced by its precise opposite and transformed into free choice. The sisters in *King Lear* appear, consequently, as the three daughters of Fate—according to mythological tradition. Freud’s detour through mythology makes the goddesses of fate represent the inexorable Law of Nature, and thus of the passing of time and the ineluctability of death as well. The spectacle of Lear carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms at the end of the play is understood in reverse. Freud refers the powerful effect this sight produces to the latent message behind the manifest representation of the scene: Cordelia is the Death Goddess

³ Other resources Freud draws on include the Judgment of Paris and the Myth of Psyche in Greek mythology; Cinderella; “The Twelve Brothers” and “The Six Swans” in Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*; and the Norns in German mythology.

who carries away the dead hero from the battlefield. She is also the Eternal wisdom who “bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying.” Following this line of analysis, Freud concludes:

. . . what is presented here are the *three* inevitable relations that a man has with a woman—the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or that they are the *three* forms taken by the figure of the mother in the course of his life—the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more. (italics mine; Freud, 1913: 301).

2.2.1 The Story behind the Scenes

Doubtlessly, Freud’s analysis of *Hamlet* is his most famous contribution to Shakespeare scholarship. On the other hand, “The Theme of the Three Caskets” is recognized by many as one of the most characteristic among his “minor” papers. Ernest Jones, for example, calls it “charming” and declares it his favorite (1957, Vol. 2: 361). But intriguingly, while Freud starts the essay by investigating the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, he notes the variation on this motif in *King Lear*, both based on the choice among three women. One would expect Freud to pursue the subject further in *The Merchant of Venice*. Freud, however, seems to have abandoned the first play midway through the discussion. His focus soon shifts to the latter play. Norman Holland touches on this point in passing but gives no comment: “Oddly enough, the essay did not say a great deal about *The Merchant of Venice*” (1960: 171).

Odd as it is, however, we may speculate that Freud was first drawn to *The Merchant of Venice* because of his own Jewish ancestry. It is clear that between Christians and the Jew, Shakespeare didn’t take sides; the poet merely dramatized what happened in the mind of his first audience in the 1590s. But it is probably not so with Freud. He declares: “My parents were Jews, and I have remained a Jew myself” (1989: 3). He might have identified himself with the antagonist in *The Merchant of Venice*. In a “self-portrait” he reflected on his sense of alienation at an early stage of his life:

When in 1873, I first joined the University, I experienced some appreciable

disappointments. Above all, I found that I was expected to feel myself *inferior* and *alien* because I was a *Jew*. I refused absolutely to do the first of these things. I have never been able to see why I should feel ashamed of my descent or . . . of my ‘*race*’. I put up . . . with my *non-acceptance into the community*. . . . at an early age I was made familiar with the fate of being in the *Opposition* (italics mine; 1989: 4)

This self-disclosure reminds us of Shylock, “the Eternal Jew” who casts his “uneerie, grandiose shadow” (Ackermann, 2011: 364) into the highest order of Venetian society peopled by Portia’s suitors. Though anti-Jewish sentiment has been expressed by Christians over the last two thousand years, Freud’s unyielding tone finds a striking counterpart in Shylock’s eloquent self-defense:

. . . he has disgrac’d me scorned my nation I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions . . . ? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? (*MV* 3.1. 52-60)

The fact that Freud fled to London from the Nazis (after the German annexation of Austria in March 1938) and died there somehow parallels the ending of Shylock, each being alien in his community.

Toward the end of “The Theme of the Three Caskets” Freud writes: “The relationship of a father to his children, which might be a fruitful source of many dramatic situations, is not turned into further account in the play” (1913: 301). Pretty clearly, the parent-child, or more precisely, the father-daughter relationship in *King Lear* retains an enduring appeal to Freud who also has three daughters. Anna, Freud’s youngest daughter, had led him to thoughts of Cordelia, as he openly declares. The fond appellation “my little only daughter” which Freud applied to Anna regularly (after her two eldest sisters were married) certainly remind us of Lear’s “our last and least” and “my poor little fool,” terms of endearment addressed to Cordelia. The theme of the youngest daughter never lost its attraction for Freud. Peter Gay notes: “We have Freud’s private word that one central motive for writing the paper was his growing awareness

that his daughter Anna, his third and last, was not only intellectually very remarkable but also emotionally very special to him” (Gay, 1989: 514). Interestingly enough: “it was one thing for Freud to encourage Anna to grow up; it was another for him to let her grow up” (Gay, 1998: 432).⁴ Peter Gay calls our attention to Freud’s ambivalence about Anna. This may serve as a footnote to the “love test” of Lear: on the one hand Lear seems willing to marry off the last of his daughters; on the other, he demands for her pledge of total devotion to him.

2.3 *Macbeth*

In his practice, Freud seems particularly intent to group his clinical cases under such collective diagnostic rubrics as hysteria, paranoia and narcissism. Nevertheless, Freud also cherishes individual differences that mark out each of his analysands. In three essays on “Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work” (1916), Freud reviews a few interesting cases, placing them in small, well-defined classes of mental aberrations.⁵ The cases under discussion in this broad category do not verge on mental collapse (at least not in the very beginning), yet they all seem to have personality disorder problems. In “Those Wrecked by Success,” the second paper of this character study, Freud draws heavily on *Macbeth* (and Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*). *Macbeth* is his favorite Shakespeare play next to *Hamlet*, both being among his list of “the ten most magnificent works of world literature” (Holland, 1960: 165). In this essay, Freud first points out the bewildering phenomenon that “people occasionally fall ill precisely when a deeply-rooted and long-cherished wish has come to fulfillment” (1916: 317). Freud goes further to suggest that

it is not at all unusual for the ego to tolerate a wish as harmless so long as it exists in phantasy alone and seems remote from fulfillment, whereas the ego will defend itself hotly against such a wish as soon as it approaches fulfillment and threatens to become a reality. (1916: 317-318)

⁴ Anna Freud began her career under Freud’s wing and became specialized in child psychoanalysis.

⁵ The three headings are: (I) The ‘Exceptions’ ; (II) Those Wrecked by Success; (III) Criminals from a Sense of Guilt.

With regard to this apparent paradox, Freud points out that the forces of conscience may also forbid a person to gain the long-cherished-for advantage from his wish-fulfillment. Though the essence and origins of judging and punishing mechanisms are unknown, as he admits, and Freud refrains from making conjectures in relation to clinical cases, he does discuss the issue “in relation to figures which great writers have created from the wealth of their knowledge of the mind” (1916: 318). He sees an example of one “wrecked by success” in the case of Lady Macbeth who collapses on reaching success.⁶ Macbeth is to be considered along with his lady (for a reason which will become evident in his discussion). Historicizing *Macbeth* in the Jacobean time, Freud confirms the widespread recognition of the play as a “*pièce d’occasion*,” written for the accession of James who succeeded to the throne of the “virginal,” childless Queen Elizabeth. Against this historical background Freud sees an important suggestion in the notion of childlessness:

It would be a perfect example of poetic justice in the manner of talion if the childlessness of Macbeth and the barrenness of his Lady were the punishment for their crimes against the sanctity of generation—if Macbeth could not become a father because he had robbed children of their father [in Banquo’s case] and a father of his children [in Macduff’s case], and if Lady Macbeth suffered the unsexing she had demanded of the spirits of murder. I believe Lady Macbeth’s illness, the transformation of her callousness into penitence, could be explained directly as a reaction to her childlessness . . . (1916: 321)

Freud turns to Holinshed’s *Chronicles* for further clues. He notices that in Holinshed *ten years* pass between the murder of Duncan (through which Macbeth becomes king) and further bloody deeds; and in these ten years Macbeth is shown as a stern but just ruler. It is not until this lapse of time that the change begins to ferment in him, under the influence of the “tormenting fear” that the Weird Sisters’ prophecy to Banquo may be fulfilled just as their prophecy concerning him has been. Only then does he contrive the

⁶ This bewildering phenomenon to which Freud draws our attention is known in modern psychology as “Fear of Success” (FOS).

murder of Banquo.

However, the temporal setting is drastically condensed in the play, which does not allow Freud to come to any conclusion. In response to questions about the accuracy of Shakespeare's depiction of their motivation and Lady Macbeth's subsequent psychic breakdown, Freud admits, "the economy of time in the tragedy expressly precludes a development of character from any motives but those inherent in the action itself" (1916: 322). Since the compressed time frame of the play does not invite an analytical conclusion, he cannot fully develop the theme of childlessness.

Freud concludes this essay with the suggestion that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are, in effect, a single personality. Referencing a Shakespearean study of Ludwig Jekels',⁷ he claims that Shakespeare would "often split a character into two personages" (1916: 323). The germs of fear which break out in Macbeth upon the first murder, though they are indeed brewing in Macbeth, ultimately surface in Lady Macbeth. Freud goes on to summarize the rapid action of the play, switching between *his* story and *hers*:

It is he who has the hallucination of the dagger before the crime; but it is she who afterwards falls ill of a mental disorder. It is he who after the murder hears the cry in the house: "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep . . ." and so "Macbeth shall sleep no more"; but we never hear that *he* slept no more, while the Queen, as we see, rises from her bed and, talking in her sleep, betrays her guilt. . . . Thus what he feared in his pangs of conscience is fulfilled in her . . .

Thus, *she* becomes all remorse while *he* is all defiance. "Together they exhaust the possibilities of reaction to the crime, like two disunited parts of a single psychical individuality" (1916: 324).

In 1914, Freud wrote to Sándor Ferenczi, one of his first followers and a confidant: "I have begun to study Macbeth, which has long been tormenting me, without having found the solution thus far" (qtd. in Gay, 1998: 314). Truly, Freud's mental

⁷ In reference to the splitting character in *Macbeth*, the editors of *SE* note: "This does not appear to have been published. In a late paper on *Macbeth* Jekels (1917) barely refers to this theory" (Freud, 1916: 323). It seems to imply that the idea is purely Freud's own.

acquisitiveness lies in the contents and characters rather than the poetry, form, or style of Shakespeare's plays. Freud's most powerful interests in general, as Peter Gay notes, "resembled exigent pressures, unresolved tensions" (1998: 314). Freud seems to apprehend the characters' repressed impulses, yet his thoughts struggle for expression, often painfully. *Macbeth*, in particular, sets him a fascinating riddle. We may add a postscript to Freud's encounters with *Macbeth*.

Max Schur, Freud's attending doctor, witnessed Freud in the last moments of life facing death with dignity and without self-pity. He had never seen anyone die like that. This leads Peter Gay to provide an ending note to his biography about Freud. Nearly four decades earlier, Freud wrote to Oskar Pfister, envisioning a scenario of death: "I have one wholly secret entreaty: only no invalidism, no paralysis of one's powers through bodily misery." Quoting *Macbeth*, Freud declared: "Let us die in harness"⁸(1998: 651). In a way, Freud acted out King *Macbeth* as he lay dying, a figure he had confessed he was not able to penetrate.

2.4 *Richard III*

In "The 'Exceptions,'" the first of the three papers on "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," Freud observes that many individuals with congenital defects or debilitating injuries feel they have been wronged by Nature, and therefore are owed reparations. They feel they are "exceptions," and are not bound by the normal rules of society. Their neurotic rebelliousness is connected with some experience or suffering in their earliest childhood, "one in respect of which they know themselves to be guiltless" and which they could look upon as an injustice imposed upon them (1916: 313).

Freud has no intention to go into what he calls an "obvious" analogy between deformities of character resulting from protracted sickliness in childhood. For discussion, he once more refers to a figure created "by the greatest of poets" (1916: 313), using King *Richard III* as a model for his analysis of people with deformities or disabilities. He quotes, almost in full, *Richard's* opening soliloquy in *Richard III*:

⁸ "At least we'll die with harness in our back" *Macbeth* 5.5. 47.

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
[.]
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (1.1. 14-31)

From a superficial view of psychology one may assume that Richard's physical deformity also influences his psyche, but Freud shows that Shakespeare delves much deeper into the subject. He paraphrases the soliloquy to emphasize the bitterness with which Richard depicts his deformity:

Nature has done me a grievous wrong in denying me the beauty of form which wins human love. Life owes me reparation for this, and I will see that I get it. I have a right to be an exception, to disregard the scruples by which others let themselves be held back. I may do wrong myself, since wrong has been done to me. (1916: 314-315).

In Richard's soliloquy, Freud constructs a narrative for one who considers himself an "exception" and claims privileges over others. Significantly, he reminds us that, on a small scale, we are already like Richard: "Richard is an enormous magnification of something we find in ourselves as well." We all think we have reason to reproach Nature and our destiny for congenital and infantile disadvantages; we all demand

reparation for early wounds to our narcissism, our self-love (1916: 315).⁹ Earlier in the same article, Freud talks about how love influences the development of our character.

Side by side with the exigencies of life, love is the great educator; and it is by love of those nearest him that the incomplete human being is induced to respect the decrees of necessity and to spare himself the punishment that follows any infringement of them. (1916: 312)

The gist is this: it is only in love that we can respect others and only by love that we may forgive ourselves. Basically Freud pictures a person who grows up in loving relationships, to whom Richard serves as a negative example.

We may digress briefly into the reception of Shakespeare's *Richard III* at this point. As many critics point out, this play has plenty of faults. It is long and uneven, and the female characters do nothing but whine and moan (even Queen Margaret, who took such an active role during her late husband's reign). And yet this play has always been one of the most popular Shakespeare plays in performance, probably because we are drawn to Richard by a common thread, our wish to be an "exception," as Freud observes. Shakespeare keeps him in the limelight throughout the performance time; Richard steals the show, and the scenes in which he does not appear feel thin and empty. Even if Richard's alleged deformity has no basis in historical sources, the power of Shakespeare's portrayal of this dynamic character overshadows everything else we know about the real Richard III.

Regarding Richard's motives, Freud highlights Shakespeare's "subtle economy of art" which does not permit the protagonist to give open and complete expression of his secret motives. Instead, Shakespeare obliges us to supplement them. Since all of us would like to claim the same exemption from some social rules, we are all connected to Richard by this claim to be "exceptional." And this is how, as Freud argues, Shakespeare tactfully diverts our intellect from critical reflection and keeps us firmly identified with the hero. Our admiration or sympathy for Richard can only be based on a sense of inner fellow-feeling for him because Shakespeare furnishes us with such a

⁹ Edith Jacobson, a child psychiatrist, endorses Freud's observation in her essay (1959).

secret background of understanding for his hero.

2.5 Is Shakespeare Freudian?

In an interview, Harold Bloom thus perceives the relationship between Freud and Shakespeare: “Freud has to be seen as a prose version of Shakespeare, the Freudian map of the mind being in fact Shakespearean. . . . What we think of as Freudian psychology is really a Shakespearean invention . . . Freud is merely codifying it” (Bloom, 1991). We may recall that Freud himself says, “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.”¹⁰

For Freud the first and foremost of the poets is Shakespeare, since Freud regards him as “the greatest of poets” (Holland, 1960: 163). Shakespeare is a true pioneer in searching the human mind; if Shakespeare dramatizes it, Freud maps it out. Very likely, Freud’s whole project of discovering the unconscious is an effort to underscore Shakespeare’s observation that “the wish is father to the thought” (*King Henry IV Part 2*; Gay, 1998: 86). Truly, our thoughts are born from our desires and hopes, however, Freud would add in red lettering, *unconsciously*.

Norman Holland argues that Freud’s ideas about literature serve as complements to his ideas about science and the science of psychoanalysis. Considered as such, psychoanalysis is supposed to seek explanations in terms of forces and energies in order to reproduce in the internal world the laws that obtain in the external world. Freud made it possible to discuss wishes and dreams scientifically, as well as to discuss the individuality of experience in the enjoyment of literature. In this regard, we find Freud regularly drawing from Shakespeare for examples to supplement his clinical findings.

3. The Othello Syndrome

Although Freud discusses *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* in detail, he rarely mentions *Othello*, the fourth of the four major tragedies. Throughout his life, Freud was

¹⁰ This was first quoted by Philip R. Lehrman in “Freud’s Contributions to Science” (in the journal *Harofe Haivri*, Vol.1 [1940]) and then cited by Lionel Trilling in “Freud and Literature” (in “The Liberal Imagination” [1940]).

haunted—”tormented” is scarcely too strong a word—by certain problems that troubled him until he solved them, as his biographer Peter Gay observes (Gay, 1989: 514). That Freud said almost nothing about *Othello* seems to be a huge blank. However, the psychiatric condition of sexual jealousy was dubbed as the Othello syndrome¹¹ in 1955 by the English psychiatrist John Todd in a paper he published with K. Dewhurst entitled “The Othello Syndrome: A Study in the Psychopathology of Sexual Jealousy.” In medical terms, it is defined as

the delusion of infidelity of a spouse or partner. The Othello syndrome affects males and, less often, females. It is characterized by *recurrent accusations of infidelity, searches for evidence, repeated interrogation* of the partner, tests of the partner’s fidelity, and sometimes stalking. The syndrome may appear by itself or in the course of paranoid schizophrenia, alcoholism, or cocaine addiction. As in *Othello*, the play by Shakespeare, the syndrome can be highly dangerous and result in disruption of a marriage, homicide and suicide.¹²
(Italics mine)

On the basis of the above diagnostic description, Othello displays almost the full range of this psychiatric condition. Though fiction abounds in descriptions of morbid jealousy, none of which is so overwhelmingly pathetic as Othello. Drawing on the concepts of psychoanalysis, I will engage in a character study of Othello in order to establish the roots of his morbid jealousy.

Traditional readings tend to present Othello in the best possible light: a noble victim destroyed by his simplicity of nature, by his innocence of Venetian society, and most of all, by the diabolical design of Iago. But most psychoanalytical studies see Othello’s character as responsible, in some way, for his downfall (Paris, 1991: 281). Karen Horney, for one, observes that Othello displays many of the characteristics of the

¹¹ Other suggestive titles given to this condition include “the erotic jealousy syndrome,” “morbid jealousy,” and perhaps most apt of all, “psychotic jealousy” (Enoch, 1991: 39)

¹² For this definition, please refer to MedTerms online medical dictionary ([Http://www.Medterms.com/](http://www.Medterms.com/)).

narcissistic person.¹³ The narcissist “is his idealized image . . . [which] gives him a seeming abundance of self-confidence” (1950: 194). Marvin Rosenberg, too, sees the negative aspects of Othello: “rootless, histrionic, . . . self-deceiving, irritable, hasty, dependent, insecure—a pathetic image who lives in a fantasy of himself and others, who shrinks from reality into a world of ‘pipe dreams’ “ (1961: 186-187). Bernard J. Paris also confirms this negative view of Othello. He argues that Othello mythologizes himself and his exploits; he strives to live up to his idealized image. His marriage to Desdemona symbolizes his entry into the highest level of Venetian society, and is therefore experienced as a gratifying triumph. He loves Desdemona, because she feeds his pride and confirms his idealized image (1991: 81-83). David Enoch, a psychiatrist, also thinks that Iago merely fanned the flame of jealousy, “which was already embedded in Othello’s personality” (1991: 38).

These arguments all point to narcissistic injury, a key factor which contributes to Othello’s jealousy and vulnerability. Before committing suicide near the end of the play, Othello desperately attempts to maintain his idealized image:

I pray you in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate
[.....] then you must speak
Of one that lov’d not wisely, but too well:
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplex’d in the extreme (5.2. 341-47)

This speech, given with a final return to his natural dignity and control, echoes the eloquence and confidence that Othello displayed earlier when he defended himself against Brabantio’s accusation of seducing Desdemona. In this last speech he justifies his homicidal act—suffocating Desdemona—and talks as if he was blameless except for having loved her too much. Yet his claim of being “not easily jealous” is obviously questionable, and that he describes himself as “one that lov’d not wisely, but too well”

¹³ Karen Horney is an anatomist important for her resistance to Freud’s phallo-centric version of feminine psychology.

is both understatement and hyperbole. He downplays his accountability for Desdemona's death while portraying himself as a fool for love. However, throughout this domestic tragedy, Othello's suspicion, which subsequently turns into morbid jealousy, contributes to his blindness to Desdemona's innocence. Directly contrary to what he claims, Othello loved his wife "too wisely" in that he always expected the worst, yet "not well" enough in that he was predisposed to believe in what the "honest" Iago's suggestion of Desdemona's guilt and to discount all evidence of her innocence.

There are early signs of this jealousy reaction long before it becomes obvious. When, for example, Othello is interrogated by Iago, over trivialities, he explodes in a fit of fury. The intensity of his reaction even surprises Iago, who remarks:

O, beware jealousy;
It is the green-eye'd monster, which doth mock
That meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss,
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves! (3.3.169-74)

The image of jealousy, the green-eyed monster, prefigures Othello caught in the eternal triangle. Precisely because Othello is a narcissist, Desdemona, being his "significant other," needs to fulfill the role of a devoted admirer. Othello's attitudes toward himself and Desdemona are interdependent; he sees his own reflection in her love. Anything which threatens his belief in her love threatens his own idealized image which he constantly needs to check from her gaze. Describing the psychopathology of the Othello syndrome, David Enoch points out that "the core of the problem is one of inadequacy, arising from a discrepancy between what the patient wants to be and what he considers he actually is" (1991: 42). In this regard Othello's feelings of inadequacy may specifically be linked with (1) his race, (2) the age gap between Desdemona and him, and (3) his insecurity. We may thus infer that Othello breaks down because he realizes, albeit unconsciously, the discrepancy between his idealized image and his true self.

This may also explain the significance of the handkerchief patterned with strawberries. Given to Desdemona as a token of love, Othello explains that it is a family

heirloom his father gave his mother, who in turn gave it to him. He tells Desdemona that the handkerchief would ensure the spouse's love when it is kept, but if lost, one would lose the love too, and thus it symbolizes their marital vow. In the play, the handkerchief practically becomes a character of its own, with which Othello is seriously obsessed. It is intriguing that the handkerchief was proclaimed "magical" by Othello, and especially that it was produced "in a fit of prophetic fury" and was "dyed in a mummy of maidens' hearts conserved." Oddly, the handkerchief, over charged with sexual innuendo, has come to speak for Othello, who feeds on Desdemona's chastity. And when she fails to flatter his ego (as he assumes), he kills her in a fit of jealous fury. It is noteworthy that when the truth regarding the handkerchief is revealed in the last scene, Othello is instantly convinced of Desdemona's chastity and innocence. Immediately, his narcissistic injuries are repaired and he is able to re-establish intimacy with Desdemona, to re-assert his connection with her, though in death.

In this a way, Shakespeare explores the emotional possibilities of Othello. It is the nature of drama that allows the spectator to identify himself with the hero on stage; we acquire vicarious satisfaction through witnessing the hero's pains, sufferings and acute fears. As Freud says, "the dramatist is to induce the same illness in *us* . . . if we are made to follow the development of the illness along with the sufferer" (1905: 310). This is how we gain insight into Othello's neurosis.

4. Conclusion

Whereas the marriage of two of the greatest minds—Shakespeare and Freud—is certainly desirable, what are its pitfalls? Psychoanalysis, in fact, psychocriticism in general, may lose sight of the fact that drama is a performance art, and thus distort the text experienced in the theater to make it fit psychoanalytical theories. Freudian drive, for instance, is often attacked for giving every form of human behavior a psychosexual explanation. In reference to such criticisms, Brian Vickers assesses psychoanalysis as a critical tool and observes the following points: (1) Freud only saw in people what his theories at any one point would allow him to see; (2) there is an absence of constraints on the production of evidence; (3) if a critical method produces so many repetitive and reductive readings, then it declares its own deficiencies; (4) those elements are omitted

that do not fit into the model; (5) the dramatic structure and plots are ignored or rearranged to privilege Freudian narrative models (1993: 276-321).

Though psychoanalysis may limit the possibilities of employing other approaches, Freud has enriched Shakespeare's plays and introduced new complexities for the understanding of characters (including but not restricted to motivations, character structure, and interpersonal dynamics). Revisiting Shakespeare with a Freudian lens is to experience afresh the sensation of reading something well known but deeply intriguing. Selecting five Shakespeare plays for discussion, I have examined what Freud said about these plays and how he analyzed those characters burdened with psychopathology. Freud's association of Oedipus complex with Hamlet's delay, and his remarks on the meaning of the three caskets, the myth of King Lear, Lady Macbeth's sleep walking, and Richard's claim to be an exception have provided valuable insights into Shakespeare's characters. All in all, Freud has suggested new approaches for our understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's craft.

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佛洛伊德論莎翁：病理性角色的解析

邱錦榮*

摘 要

佛洛伊德（1856—1939）在其精神分析的著作中，信手拈來俱是文學案例。受到十九世紀歐陸人文教育的薰陶，佛氏自幼浸淫於歐洲古典文學。佛洛伊德於維也納大學獲得醫學博士，之後以自然科學的研究方法，自「神經醫學」(Neurology)另闢蹊徑。佛洛伊德從精神病症和夢的解析出發，在尋求臨床治療的途徑時，也同時開啓無意識的探索，試圖以語言描繪這個解剖學完全看不見的領域，揭開人類心智深層結構的運作機制。

佛氏八歲開始讀莎士比亞，尤其鍾情莎翁的戲劇，對於其中人物往往視同診間個案，推敲琢磨人物的心理狀態、動機、依附關係等。佛氏吸收文學家對人的心理與行為的呈現和詮釋，擷取文學作品(尤其是戲劇文學)的素材，因此精神分析的理論在建構之初就納入了文學案例。文學與精神分析的共同點在於：它們都是人類生存的敘事。作為閱讀文學作品的工具，精神分析擅長於發現潛在文本或次文本 (Subtext)，窺視角色人物的心理、動機，瞭解人際之間的依附與衝突，乃至於追溯創作者的心懷意念。佛氏對莎劇的論述，除了最著名也極具爭議的哈姆雷特「伊底帕斯情結」之外，關於其他的病理性角色亦有相當著墨，如李爾王、馬克白、理查三世等。受到佛洛伊德〈舞台上的病理性角色〉(1915)一文的啓發，本文試圖耙梳佛氏討論莎翁個別劇本與人物的相關論述，篩選出五齣佛氏曾經聚焦分析的劇作，討論莎翁描繪病理性角色的精湛之處。佛氏於四大悲劇中的三齣都有評論，獨於《奧賽羅》，幾無隻字片語可尋。個人以晚近精神醫學的「奧賽羅症候群」為論點，嘗試對佛氏於此劇的緘默做一微小補白。

關鍵詞：莎士比亞、佛洛伊德、精神分析、心理病態、奧賽羅

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