

The Tragedy of Hoemdiplot: Freud's Fusion of Oedipus and Hamlet

Sigmund Freud's interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus* inaugurated a new psychoanalytic reading of Greek tragedy that remained central—even if often contested—to the twentieth-century reception of Sophocles. However, from its inception, Freud's interpretation of the psychosexual conflict later termed a “complex” rests on the *simultaneous* reading of *OT* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In fact, Freud's reading of the effect of *OT* on the modern audience only makes sense if one adopts the understanding of Oedipal conflict in the specific terms of his reading of *Hamlet*—as I argue here. So in essence, his interpretation is based on a fused reading, where Oedipus and Hamlet shed a light on each other that cannot come from the characters viewed in isolation. I shall argue this along two tracks: 1) the textual evidence for his original interpretation and its later published form, and 2) the theoretical coherence that the theory of repression brings to bridge the gap between the two plays, which explains their necessary fusion in Freud's reading.

In terms of textual evidence, we find already in Freud's momentous letter to Wilhelm Fliess of October 15, 1897 that Freud's clinical intuition had solved not one, but two psychological riddles (Masson 1985, 272-273). First, why is *OT* so effective on a modern audience; second, what is really wrong with Hamlet? Freud was fond of the idea that scientific discoveries answer nature's “riddles,” and we can see the enormous satisfaction Freud derives from his insight into these great works—as well as his anxiety when Fliess does not immediately respond to it. However, when Freud publically incorporates this interpretation into the context of his dream theory in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, but finished in 1899), Oedipus is given pride of place, while Hamlet is relegated to a footnote in the first three editions. However, beginning with the fourth edition (1914), the footnote on Hamlet was put into the main text,

effectively restoring Freud's original bifocal vision (see 1953, 4:261-266). Freud expanded on his reading of Sophocles somewhat in later years, but Ernest Jones wrote the definitive monograph on *Hamlet*, following Freud's interpretation faithfully. This follow-up by another member of the Psychoanalytic Movement was typical of the *bottega*-like division of labor between Freud and his followers. While Freud elaborated the clinical theory of the Oedipus complex, his followers (like Otto Rank, Hanns Sachs, and Jones) traced its cultural implications.

From the outset, the essential bridge between the two plays and their interpretation is Freud's theory of repression, the dynamic psychological force that turns the child's experience of Oedipal tensions into an unconscious "complex." Here it is essential to stress again that Freud's reading of *OT* is from the point of view of the modern *audience*, while his reading of *Hamlet* is from the point of view of Hamlet the character. Hamlet cannot kill his uncle because of an unconscious identification with what his uncle has done (i.e., kill his father and marry his mother), which creates an unconscious inhibition towards fulfilling his ghostly father's call to revenge. "His conscience is his unconscious sense of guilt" [*Sein Gewissen ist sein unbewußtes Schuldbewußtsein*—Masson 1985, 273]. Similarly, the theatrical Oedipus is compelling—even so many centuries after Sophocles—because of the unconscious identification of the modern audience with the Greek hero, whose crimes emerge as our own wish fulfillment (originally Freud wrote *Traumerfüllung*, or "dream fulfillment"). Freud assumes Oedipus' supposed innocence, based on his "fated" or unconscious actions, is simply secondary revision to cover the "real story"—i.e., of consciously willed patricide and maternal incest. But so blatant an Oedipal drama can only be effective if we, the audience, are modern neurotics like Hamlet—unconsciously identifying with what seems to be an isolated ancient pariah, who is rather a very contemporary Everyman, a figure of our own infantile desires taken to their extreme. In

conclusion, we might say Freud deploys *OT* as Hamlet deploys “The Murder of Gonzago,” the play-within-the play: the play’s the thing wherein Freud hopes to catch the unconscious of the modern audience and convince it of its own Oedipal guilt, and therefore, the validity of the Oedipus complex.

Bibliography

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