Freud: A Shakespearean Reading

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Every critic has (or should have) her or his own favorite critical joke. Mine is to compare "Freudian literary criticism" to the Holy Roman Empire: not holy, not Roman, not an empire; not Freudian, not literary, not criticism. Freud bears only part of the blame for the reductiveness of his Anglo-American followers; he need share no responsibility for the Franco-Heideggerian psycholinguistics of Jacques Lacan and company. Whether you believe that the unconscious is an internal combustion engine (American Freudians), or a structure of phonemes (French Freudians), or an ancient metaphor (as I do), you will not interpret Shakespeare any more usefully by applying Freud's map of the mind, or analytical system, to the plays. Freudian allegorization of Shakespeare is as unsatisfactory as are current Foucaultian (New Historicist), Marxist, and feminist allegorizations or past Christian and moral views of the plays through ideological lenses.

For many years I have taught that, essentially, Freud is prosified Shakespeare: Freud's vision of human psychology is derived, not altogether unconsciously, from his reading of Shakespeare's plays. The founder of psychoanalysis read Shakespeare in English throughout his life and recognized that Shakespeare was the greatest of writers. Shakespeare haunted Freud as he haunts the rest of us: deliberately and unintentionally, Freud found himself quoting (and misquoting) Shakespeare in conversation, in his letters, and in the writings which created for psychoanalysis a literature of its own. I don't think it is accurate to say that Freud loved Shakespeare as he loved Goethe and Milton. Whether he could even be called ambivalent toward Shakespeare seems to me doubtful. Freud did not love the Bible or show any ambivalence toward it; and Shakespeare, much more than the Bible, became Freud's hidden authority, a father he would not acknowledge.

Whether consciously or not, Freud resented Shakespeare and on some level weirdly associated him with Moses, as in his essay "The Moses of Michelangelo." This remarkable meditation upon Michelangelo's sculpture was published anonymously in 1914 in the psychoanalytic journal Imago, as though Freud wished to disavow it even as he made it known to his disciples. He begins by remarking on the bewildering or riddling effect of certain masterpieces of literature and of sculpture, and before he mentions the Moses of Michelangelo, he speaks of Hamlet as a problem that psychoanalysis has solved. A very unattractive dogmatism pervades this pronouncement, shielded as it is by anonymity:

Let us consider Shakespeare's masterpiece, Hamlet, a play now over three centuries old. I have followed the literature of psychoanalysis closely, and I accept its claim that it was not until the material of the tragedy had been traced back analytically to the Oedipus theme that the mystery of its effect was at last explained. But before this was done, what a mass of differing and contradictory interpretative attempts, what a variety of opinions about the hero's character and the dramatist's design! Does Shakespeare claim our sympathies on behalf of a sick man, or of an ineffectual weakling, or of an idealist who is only too good for the real world? And how many of these interpretations leave us cold—so cold that they do nothing to explain the effect of the play and rather incline us to the thoughts in it and the splendour of its language. And yet, do not those very endeavours speak for the fact that we feel the need of discovering in it some source of power beyond these alone?

Rather than argue with this, I prefer to ask why Freud should have chosen to discuss Hamlet in connection with Michelangelo's Moses. Oddly, he will be far more suggestive and imaginative in his interpretation of the marble statue than in his reduction of Shakespeare's most complex character to a victim of an Oedipal fixation. Perhaps identifying with Moses activated Freud's imagination, but I tend to believe that Shakespeare induced a considerable anxiety in Freud, while Michelangelo provoked none. Eventually, Freud was to link Moses and Shakespeare indirectly in a troubling way; both figures were not who they seemed to be, and Freud refused to accept any traditional account of either. In Freud's final phase, Moses and Monothemism replaced the Bible's Hebrew prophet of God with an Egyptian, while William Shakespeare was allowed his historical existence as an actor, but not as a writer.
Freud went to his death insisting that Moses had been an Egyptian and also that the Earl of Oxford had written the plays and poems falsely ascribed to Shakespeare. The latter notion, perpetrated by the fittingly named J. Thomas Looney in *Shakespeare Identified* (1921), is even crazier than the former. Nevertheless, the Looney hypothesis became Freudian truth within a few years and was still being affirmed in Freud's final work, the posthumously published *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. Nothing, of course, could be loonier: Edward de Vere, the seventeenth earl of Oxford, lived from 1550 to 1604, and was thus dead before the composition of *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the late Shakespearean romances. To be a Looneyite you have to argue that these plays were left in manuscript at Oxford's death and then go on from there. How could Freud, possibly the best mind of our century, have fallen into such zaniness?

Freud's desire that Shakespeare not be Shakespeare took a variety of forms before his gladsome discovery of the Looney hypothesis. One feels that Freud was open to every possible suggestion that the son of a Stratford glover, the actor William Shakespeare, was an impostor. Ernest Jones, Freud's hagiographer, tells us that Theodor Meynert, who taught the young Freud neuroanatomy, believed in the theory that Sir Francis Bacon had written Shakespeare. Despite his admiration for Meynert, Freud declined to become a Baconian, but for a revealing reason: Bacon's cognitive achievement added to Shakespeare's eminence would give us an author with "the most powerful brain the world has ever produced." Rejecting the Baconian thesis, Freud picked up every other weird notion circulated about and against Shakespeare, including an Italian academic's suggestion that the name was a version of Jacques Pierre! When he encountered Looney's book in 1923, he swallowed it whole. It did not matter that the Earl of Oxford was dead before *Lear* was composed; it mattered enormously that Oxford, like Lear, had three daughters. A committee of friends could finish the dead nobleman's plays, but the actor from Stratford was short one daughter. What was working in Freud's subtle and powerful mind that allowed him to be taken in by such literalism? The Oedipus complex, imposed upon Hamlet decades before by Freud, was now the Oxford complex. What qualified the earl to be the author of *Hamlet* was this: Oxford had lost his father while still a boy and eventually estranged himself from his mother, who had remarried. It would have done no good to tell Freud that such a practice was common in the Elizabethan high aristocracy; he wanted, he needed the poet of *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* to be a wealthy and powerful nobleman.

If Freud indeed owed Shakespeare much too much, how did it lessen the burden if Oxford and not the provincial actor was the precursor? Was this merely Freud's Viennese social snobbery? My surmise is that Freud desperately wanted to read the great tragedies as autobiographical revelations. The actor from Stratford would do well enough as the dramatist of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but not as the creator of domestic tragedies of those in high estate. In a letter to his old friend, Arnold Zweig, dated April 2, 1937, Freud comes close to losing his composure at his inability to convert the baffled Zweig to Looneyism:

He seems to have nothing at all to justify his claim, whereas Oxford has almost everything. It is quite inconceivable to me that Shakespeare should have got everything secondhand — Hamlet's neurosis, Lear's madness, Macbeth's defiance and the character of Lady Macbeth, Othello's jealousy, etc. It almost irritates me that you should support the notion.

I read these words with amazement: this is a powerful and sophisticated mind, still at the height of its powers; indeed, it is the mind of our age, as Montaigne was the mind of Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's mind, as Freud knows but refuses to acknowledge, is the mind of all the ages, and the centuries to come will never catch up with it. Freud, hardly an unimaginative consciousness, calls the Shakespearean imagination a getting of "everything secondhand."

Freud's defensiveness here is awesome. It is as though he badly needs to have *Hamlet* written by Hamlet, *Lear* by Lear, *Macbeth* by Macbeth, *Othello* by Othello. The inference would seem to be that Freud himself has written *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*; his *Lear* in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*; his *Othello* in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*; and his *Macbeth* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The "man from Stratford" could not have invented Freudian psychology; the earl of Oxford, that proud and wayward peer, could not have invented it either, but he, unlike the humble actor, could have lived it. Unless one is a religious Freudian, all this is the ancient story of literary influence and its anxieties. Shakespeare is the inventor of
A Hamlet complex is a very rich affair, since there is a Hamlet complex, and perhaps psychoanalysis is a Shakespeare complex! As a student of literary influence, I do not know how to overestimate the influence of Shakespeare on Freud. It does not differ in kind, only in degree, from Shakespeare's influence on Goethe, Ibsen, Joyce, and so many other writers. But I want to go further. Shakespeare influences Freud the way Emerson influences Whitman—that is, he is Freud's prime precursor, as Wordsworth is for Shelley, or Shelley for Yeats, or Yeats for all Anglo-Irish poets after him, the superb Seamus Heaney included. Freud's anxiety in the matter of Shakespeare we have seen already; had Looney never existed, Freud would have invented an earl of Oxford on his own.

Freudian literary criticism of Shakespeare is a celestial joke; Shakespearean criticism of Freud will have a hard birth, but it will come, since Freud as a writer will survive the death of psychoanalysis. Transference to a shaman is an ancient technique of healing found throughout the world, one widely studied by anthropologists and scholars of the history of religion. Shamanism preceded psychoanalysis and will survive it, since it is the purest form of dynamic psychiatry. Freud's work, which is the description of the totality of human nature, far transcends the faded Freudian therapy. If there is an essence of Freud, it must be found in his vision of civil war within the psyche. That division presupposes a view of how the personality is organized and a number of myths or metaphors to render that organization dynamic (or, to use a more literary term, dramatic). These Freudian figurations include psychic energy, the drives, the mechanisms of defense. Though Freud, as befits a founder, carried out a self-analysis in order to discover or invent his drama of the self, he explicitly forbade all those who came after him to emulate their leader.

This premier self-analysis depended for its coherence upon a dramatic paradigm, and Freud found it where European romanticism generally has found it, in Hamlet. Oedipus, I suggest, was hauled in by Freud largely in order to cover up an obligation to Shakespeare. The Freudian analogies between the two tragedies represent strong misreadings and cannot be sustained by an analysis that evades Freud's privileging of what he called the Oedipus complex. A Hamlet complex is a very rich affair, since there is no more intelligent character in all of Western literature. The Oedipus of Sophocles may have a Hamlet complex (which I define as thinking not too much but much too well), yet the Hamlet of the man from Stratford most definitely does not have an Oedipus complex.

Shakespeare's Hamlet certainly loves and honors the memory of his father and harbors considerable reservations about his mother. Freud's contention is that Hamlet unconsciously desires his mother, and unconsciously had murderous thoughts about his father, of the kind actually carried out by Claudius. Shakespeare is rather subtler; his Oedipal tragedies are King Lear and Macbeth, but not Hamlet. Queen Gertrude, recently the recipient of several feminist defenses, requires no apologies. She is evidently a woman of exuberant sexuality, who inspired luxurious passion first in King Hamlet and later in King Claudius. Freud
would not bother to notice it, but Shakespeare was careful to show that Prince Hamlet as a child was rather neglected, at least by his father. Nowhere in the play does anyone, including Hamlet and the Ghost, tell us that the uxurious father loved his son. The fractious king—like Fortinbras, a basher in battle—seems to have had no time for the child, what with the demands of state, war, and husbandly lust. Thus, when the Ghost urges Hamlet to revenge, it cries out: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love — " but says nothing about its own affection for the prince. Similarly, Hamlet, in his first soliloquy, emphasizes his parents' devotion to each other, while excluding their regard, if any, for him. His own memories of love, taken and given, center entirely upon poor Yorick, his father's jester, who took the place of the parents so smitten each other:

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorr'd in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss'd I know not how oft.

Hamlet, in the graveyard of act 5, is virtually beyond affect, even when he disputes with Laertes on who felt more love for the dead Ophelia. The sadness of his cold elegy for Yorick might have made Freud reflect that there were no other lips—not Ophelia's, Gertrude's, or King Hamlet's—that the hero had kissed he knew not how oft. Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex is the masterpiece of what Freud called emotional ambivalence, which he thought he had first formulated. I have dismissed the Oedipus complex as largely irrelevant to Hamlet, but where had Freud encountered extraordinary affective and cognitive ambivalence in literature? Where else but in Hamlet, the character in whom Shakespeare first fully invested his genius for representing ambivalence? Hamlet has taught Europe and the world the lesson of ambivalence for almost four centuries now, and Freud was a latecomer in Hamlet's wake. As an interpreter of Hamlet, Freud does not warrant a passing grade, but as a commentator upon Freudian concerns, Hamlet surpasses all rivals. Here is the starting point in Freud's celebrated letter of October 15, 1897, to Wilhelm Fliess:

Since then I have got much further, but have not yet reached any real resting-place. Communicating the incomplete is so laborious and would take me so far afield that I hope you will excuse me, and content yourself with hearing the parts which are established for certain. If the analysis goes on as I expect, I shall write it all out systematically and lay the results before you. So far I have found nothing completely new, but all the complications to which by now I am used. It is no easy matter. Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise. Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood, even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have been made hysterics. (Similarly with the "romanticization of origins" in the case of paranoiacs—heroes, founders of religion.) If that is the case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dramas were such failures. Our feelings rise against any arbitrary, individual fate such as shown in the Ahnfrau, etc., but the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfilment 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 idea has passed through my head that the same thing may lie at the root of Hamlet. I am not hinting of Shakespeare's conscious intentions, but supposing rather that he was impelled to write it by a real event because his own unconscious understood that of his hero. How can one explain the hysteric Hamlet's phrase "So conscience doth make cowards of us all;" and his hesitation to avenge his father by killing his uncle, when he himself so casually sends his courtiers to their death and despatches Laertes so quickly? How better than by the torment roused in him by the obscure memory that he himself had meditated the same deed against his father because of passion for his mother—"use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?" His conscience is his unconscious feeling of guilt. And are not his sexual coldness when talking to Ophelia, his rejection of the instinct to beget
children, and finally his transference of the deed from his father to Ophelia, typically hysterical? And does he not finally succeed, in just the same remarkable way as my hysterics do, in bringing down his punishment on himself and suffering the same fate as his father, being poisoned by the same rival?

The peculiar badness of that second paragraph, when taken as a reading of Hamlet, causes me to blink and wince, but its literary power survives its weak misreading of a rival who had poisoned Freud and went on poisoning him. How different these two paragraphs are: Oedipus Rex is viewed abstractly and at a great distance from the text, while Hamlet is seen up close, and details and verbal reminiscences abound. The remarks about Oedipus Rex could be made about absolutely any literary work that turned upon a tragic fate; there is nothing there that is specific to Sophocles' play. But Hamlet is an intimate matter for Freud: the play reads him, and allows him to analyze himself as a Hamlet. Hamlet is not a hysteric, except for brief lapses, but Freud has his hysterics—his patients—and he assimilates Hamlet to them. Far more interestingly, he has assimilated himself to Hamlet, and to Hamlet's ambivalence. The assimilation continued in what Freud liked to call his Dream Book, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), where the Oedipus complex is first overtly formulated, though not named as such until 1910.

By 1900, Freud had learned to mask his Shakespearean indebtedness, since in the Dream Book he gives a very full (if curiously dry) account of Oedipus Rex before going on to Hamlet the person. We have the puzzle that Hamlet and not Oedipus Rex is Freud's true concern and interest, and yet the term chosen is not the Hamlet complex. Few figures in cultural history have had anything like Freud's success at insinuating concepts into our consciousness. "Why, of course, it is the Oedipus complex, and we all have it," we learn to mutter, but in fact it is the Hamlet complex, and only writers and other creators necessarily possess it.

Why didn't Freud call it the Hamlet complex? Oedipus unknowingly cuts down his father, while Hamlet had no such impulses at all toward the rightful king, though as the prince of ambivalences he doubtless had counter-impulses toward everyone at every level of his multiform consciousness. The Hamlet complex would have drawn the menacing Shakespeare too closely into the matrix of psychoanalysis; Sophocles was far safer and also offered the prestige of classical origins. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Hamlet enters only in a long footnote to the discussion of Oedipus, and it was not until the 1934 edition that the anxious Freud elevated the discussion of Hamlet into his text, as one long, dense paragraph:

Another of the great creations of tragic poetry, Shakespeare's Hamlet, has its roots in the same soil as Oedipus Rex. But the changed treatment of the same material reveals the whole difference in the mental life of these two widely separated epochs of civilization: the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind. In the Oedipus the child's wishful phantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realized as it would be in a dream. In Hamlet it remains repressed; and—just as in the case of a neurosis—we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences. Strangely enough, the overwhelming effect produced by the more modern tragedy has turned out to be compatible with the fact that people have remained completely in the dark as to the hero's character. The play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations, and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result. According to the view which was originated by Goethe and is still the prevailing one today, Hamlet represents the type of man whose power of direct action is paralysed by an excessive development of his intellect. (He is 'sickled o'er with the pale cast of thought.') According to another view, the dramatist has tried to portray a pathologically irresolute character which might be classed as neurasthenic. The plot of the drama shows us, however, that Hamlet is far from being represented as a person incapable of taking any action. We see him doing so on two occasions: first in a sudden outburst of temper, when he runs his sword through the eavesdropper behind the arras, and secondly in a premeditated and even crafty fashion, when, with all the callousness of a Renaissance prince, he sends the two courtiers to the death that had been planned for himself. What is it, then, that inhibits him in fulfilling the task set him by his father's ghost? The answer, once again, is that it is the peculiar nature of the task. Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the
man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish. Here I have translated into conscious terms what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet's mind; and if anyone is inclined to call him a hysteric, I can only accept the fact as one that is implied by my interpretation. The distaste for sexuality expressed by Hamlet in his conversation with Ophelia fits in very well with this: the same distaste which was destined to take possession of the poet's mind more and more during the years that followed, and which reached its extreme expression in Timon of Athens. For it can of course only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in Hamlet. I observe in a book on Shakespeare by Georg Brandes (1896) a statement that Hamlet was written immediately after the death of Shakespeare's father (in 1601), that is, under the immediate impact of his bereavement and, as we may well assume, while his childhood feelings about his father had been freshly revived. It is known, too, that Shakespeare's own son who died at an early age bore the name 'Hamnet,' which is identical with 'Hamlet.' Just as Hamlet deals with the relation of a son to his parents, so Macbeth (written at approximately the same period) is concerned with the subject of childlessness. But just as all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams, are capable of being 'overinterpreted' and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation. In what I have written I have only attempted to interpret the deepest layer of impulses in the mind of the creative writer.

"Repression in the emotional life of mankind" is a curious expression, since Freud cannot be talking about Oedipus and Hamlet, but only about Sophocles and Shakespeare. Oedipus, after all, has no idea of whom he has slain at the crossroads, and Hamlet would not have agreed with Freud that his ambivalence about cutting down Claudius represented guilt at having wished the murder of his own father. One might repeat at this point that Hamlet's powers of self-analysis not only at least match Freud's, but provide Freud with a paradigm for emulation. It is not Hamlet who lies upon the famous couch in Dr. Freud's office, but Freud who hovers with the rest of us in a miasma of corruption in the halls at Elsinore, and Freud has no special privilege as we jostle one another in the corridors. Goethe, Coleridge, Hazlitt, A. C. Bradley, and Harold Goddard are there with the rest of us, since everyone who reads Hamlet or sees it performed is compelled to become an interpreter.

Freud tells us that a healthy Hamlet would murder Claudius, and since Hamlet evades the act, he must be a hysteric. I turn again to the Nietzschean refinement of Goethe's view, which is that Hamlet thinks not too much but much too well, and at the frontiers of human consciousness declines to become his father, who certainly would have skewered his uncle in the same circumstances. Young Fortinbras is old Fortinbras come again, another bully boy, but Prince Hamlet is hardly just his father's son. To say gently that Freud crudely misreads and underestimates Hamlet is not, alas, to divest Freud's misprision of its permanent strength.

Freud declines to see how intellectually formidable Hamlet and Shakespeare are, but I do not underestimate Freud. All of us now believe we possess (or are possessed by) libido, but there is no such entity: there is, in fact, no separate sexual energy. Had Freud decided to fuel the Death Drive with destrudo, a notion that once engaged him, we would all go about now carrying with us not only our Oedipus complex and our libido but our destrudo as well. Fortunately, Freud decided against destrudo, but our near-miss should be instructive. Freud, as Wittgenstein warned, is a powerful mythologist; he is the great mythmaker of our time, fit rival to Proust, Joyce, and Kafka as the canonical center of modern literature. His rallying-cry is the final sentence of the long paragraph on Hamlet quoted above; after an unconvincing gesture of interpretive modesty, supposedly granting that authentic creative writing is produced by "more than a single motive and more than a single impulse;" Freud charmingly suggests that his "single interpretation" attempts to reach bedrock—that is, "the deepest layer of impulses in the mind of the creative writer." "Deepest" strata
do not exist in the mind; Milton's Satan, a great poet, rightly laments that in every deep a lower deep opens and threatens to devour him. Freud, himself a Miltonic rather than a Satanic figure, understood the metaphor of "the deepest" as well as anyone has understood it.

The issue, I insist, is not the Oedipus complex but the Hamlet complex, and Freud worried it once more in "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage;" a sketch for an essay that was written in 1905 or 1906 but published posthumously:

The first of these modern dramas is *Hamlet*. It has as its subject the way in which a man who has so far been normal becomes neurotic owing to the peculiar nature of the task by which he is faced, a man, that is, in whom an impulse that has hitherto been successfully suppressed endeavors to make its way into action. *Hamlet* is distinguished by three characteristics which seem important in connection with our present discussion. (1) The hero is not psychopathic, but only becomes psychopathic in the course of the action of the play. (2) The repressed impulse is one of those which are similarly repressed in all of us, and the repression of which is part and parcel of the foundations of our personal evolution. It is this repression which is shaken up by the situation in the play. As a result of these two characteristics it is easy for us to recognize ourselves in the hero: we are susceptible to the same conflict as he is, since "a person who does not lose his reason under certain conditions can have no reason to lose." (3) It appears as a necessary precondition of this form of art that the impulse that is struggling into consciousness, however clearly it is recognizable, is never given a definite name; so that in the spectator too the process is carried through with his attention averted, and he is in the grip of his emotions instead of taking stock of what is happening. A certain amount of resistance is no doubt saved in this way, just as, in an analytic treatment, we find derivatives of the repressed material reaching consciousness, owing to a lower resistance, while the repressed material itself is unable to do so. After all, the conflict in *Hamlet* is so effectively concealed that it was left to me to unearth it.

We are a great distance from *Hamlet* here, barred from it by Freud's system and by his burst of "unearthing" dogmatism. What is clear is that there is now absolutely no distinction between Hamlet and a Freudian client, even in degree of interest! The hero of Western consciousness is just one more psychopath, and a Shakespearean tragedy is reduced to a case for analytic treatment. We might call this rather dreary paragraph "The Passing of the Hamlet Complex," except that I do not believe it. What actually happened was that Hamlet was replaced by Lear and by Macbeth, and Freud's struggle with Shakespeare was transferred to different battlegrounds, since the handling of *Hamlet* in five later contexts added nothing but Oedipal repetitions that were unworthy of Freud as agonist.

Freud found his first Cordelia in Martha Bernays, before she became his wife, and his second and more authentic Cordelia in his daughter Anna, his great favorite among all his children and his worthy continuator in her strong book on the ego and its mechanisms of defense. The Freudian reading of *King Lear* is to be found partly in a fascinating essay, "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), and partly in a late letter to one Bransom that was written on March 25, 1934, and printed in an appendix to *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* by Ernest Jones. James S. H. Bransom had written an unfortunate book on *King Lear* which found the play's hidden meaning in Lear's repressed incestuous lust for Cordelia, an insane view with which Freud happily concurred. This is the mythologically impressive conclusion of "The Theme of the Three Caskets."

Lear is an old man. We said before that this is why the three sisters appear as his daughters. The paternal relationship, out of which so many fruitful dramatic situations might arise, is not turned to further account in the drama. But Lear is not only an old man; he is a dying man. The extraordinary project of dividing the inheritance thus loses its strangeness. The doomed man is nevertheless not willing to renounce the love of women; he insists on hearing how much he is loved. Let us now recall that most moving last scene, one of the
culminating points reached in modern tragic drama: "Enter Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms." Cordelia is Death. Reverse the situation and it becomes intelligible and familiar to us — the Death-goddess bearing away the dead hero from the place of battle, like the Valkyr in German mythology. Eternal wisdom, in the garb of the primitive myth, bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying. The poet brings us very near to the ancient idea by making the man who accomplishes the choice between the three sisters aged and dying. The regressive treatment he has thus undertaken with the myth, which was disguised by the reversal of the wish, allows its original meaning so far to appear that perhaps a superficial allegorical interpretation of the three female figures in the theme becomes possible as well. One might say that the three inevitable relations man has with woman are here represented: that with the mother who bears him, with the companion of his bed and board, and with the destroyer. Or is it the three forms taken on by the figure of the mother as it proceeds: the mother herself, the beloved who is chosen after her pattern, and finally the Mother Earth who receives him again. But it is vain that the old man yearns after the love of woman as once he had it from his mother; the third of the Fates alone, the silent goddess of Death, will take him into her arms.

I am baffled by Freud's judgment that "the paternal relationship ... is not turned to further account in the drama," since King Lear concerns itself with two paternal relationships, Lear to Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan, and Gloucester to Edgar and Edmund. What is Freud repressing? Lear, though immensely old, is not a dying man until the final scene, and the loyal Cordelia is hardly Death, but who would want to quarrel with the magnificent sentence that ends the first paragraph? Few moments even in Proust, Joyce, and Kafka are more memorable than the Freudian wisdom that bids us "renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying." Its reverberations are felt in the eloquent prose poem of the final paragraph, where Lear and Freud blend together into a larger mystic figure, almost a dying god.

Alas, twenty-one years later, we are given a jumble of psychoanalytic reductiveness and Looneyite Oxfordism. Bransom is assured that he is right as to Lear, and then Cordelia-Anna is added to the incestuous middle:

Your supposition illuminates the riddle of Cordelia as well as that of Lear. The elder sisters have already overcome the fateful love for the father and become hostile to him; to speak analytically, they are resentful at the disappointment in their early love. Cordelia still clings to him; her love for him is her holy secret. When asked to reveal it publicly she has to refuse defiantly and remain dumb. I have seen just that behavior in many cases.

This is too absurd to refute; when had Freud last read or seen the play? Rather than belabor him, let us pore over his more interesting errors or inventions. He says that there is no mention of the mother of Lear's daughters; there is one, though it is not crucial. But what gave Freud the idea that Goneril is pregnant? And how could he believe that Lear's madness ensued not from the old king's fury but from his barely repressed desire for Cordelia? All this pales besides the information imparted to Bransom, and to us, that Albany in King Lear, as well as Horatio in Hamlet, are to be equated with Lord Derby, the earl of Oxford's first son-in-law. "O, matter and impertinency mix'd; Reason in madness!" The resistance to Shakespeare, pronounced enough in the Freudian reading of Hamlet-as-Oedipus, has achieved awesome complexity in this blend of Lear, Oxford, and Freud into one. What has happened to the apocalyptic tragedy that Shakespeare wrote, and where is Sigmund Freud, who once knew how to read? Both the drama and Freud's interpretive strength vanish into the terrible need to fend off the untutored actor from Stratford.

King Lear was too close for Freud; Macbeth allowed him to return to himself, particularly in the essay "Some Character-Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work" (1916), where we are reminded why Freud is indeed a canonical author. He had remarked long before that the childlessness of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth was a key to the tragedy's meaning. In the 1916 essay he centers upon Lady Macbeth as a character "wrecked by success" and by subsequent remorse:
It would be a perfect example of poetic justice in the manner of the talion if the childlessness of Macbeth and the barrenness of his Lady were the punishment for their crimes against the sanctity of geniture — if Macbeth could not become a father because he had robbed children of their father and a father of his children, and if Lady Macbeth had suffered the unsexing she had demanded of the spirits of murder. I believe one could without more ado explain the illness of Lady Macbeth, the transformation of her callousness into penitence, as a reaction to her childlessness, by which she is convinced of her impotence against the decrees of nature, and at the same time admonished that she has only herself to blame if her crime has been barren of the better part of its results.

How many children had Lady Macbeth? The question, asked facetiously by a formalist critic, is not by any means a silly one, though it cannot be answered with any certitude. Freud speaks of her "barrenness;" but why then does she say that she has given suck? As the wife of a powerful thane who is the king's cousin, she is too highly placed to have nursed any child but her own. We must conclude that there was at least one child, but it died. Nor can she have been left barren, since Macbeth in praise of her resolution urges her to bring forth men-children only. And yet Macbeth has his Herod-like aspect; he tries to have Fleance, Banquo's son, murdered, and he orders the slaughter of Macduff's children. There is a horror of generation in Macbeth's almost Gnostic hatred of time, and both he and Lady Macbeth are haunted by the prophecy that Banquo's descendants (the Stuart line that began in England with James I, son of Mary, Queen of Scots) will come to rule Scotland. Freud is therefore pragmatically right to assert that Macbeth is a play "about childlessness," and he impressively concedes that he cannot give a total interpretation of the play, a concession that would have been equally relevant in his accounts of Hamlet and King Lear, but his intimate reaction to Hamlet and Lear presumably excluded such a disclaimer:

What, however, these motives can have been which in so short a space of time could turn the hesitating, ambitious man into an unbridled tyrant, and his steel-hearted instigator into a sick woman gnawed by remorse, it is, in my view, impossible to divine. I think we must renounce the hope of penetrating the triple obscurity of the bad preservation of the text, the unknown intention of the dramatist, and the hidden purport of the legend. But I should not admit that such investigations are idle in view of the powerful effect which the tragedy has upon the spectator. The dramatist can indeed, during the representation, overwhelm us by his art and paralyse our powers of reflection; but he cannot prevent us from subsequently attempting to grasp the psychological mechanism of that effect. And the contention that the dramatist is at liberty to shorten at will the natural time and duration of the events he brings before us, if by the sacrifice of common probability he can enhance the dramatic effect, seems to me irrelevant in this instance. For such a sacrifice is justified only when it merely affronts probability, and not when it breaks the causal connection; besides, the dramatic effect would hardly have suffered if the time-duration had been left in uncertainty, instead of being expressly limited to some few days.

This paragraph begins as one of interpretive modesty and proceeds to a fecund testiness on questions of dramatic representation, particularly of time. Again I suspect repression in Freud, to explain his discontent, and I assume that his Hamlet complex is at work here. If ambivalence (or rather its representation) is a Shakespearean and not a Freudian concept, indeed became Freudian only because of Freud's experience of Shakespeare, then Freud is compelled to resent and misread the strongest Shakespearean representations of ambivalence, and those are the four great dramatic tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. I know of no other instances in literature, Dante included, where we are placed so persuasively in an equivocal cosmos where emotional ambivalence governs nearly all relationships and where cognitive ambivalence — in Hamlet, Iago, Edmund — helps to overdetermine those murderous intensities that are Freud's truest subject. Neither Hamlet nor Othello manifests the Hamlet complex, and neither do Cordelia, Desdemona, Ophelia, and Edgar; but Iago, Edmund, Goneril, Regan, Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth are immortal masterpieces of ambivalence carried to the heights of the sublime. Freud sails in Shakespeare's wake; the anxiety of influence has no more distinguished sufferer in our time than the founder
of psychoanalysis, who always discovered that Shakespeare had been there before him, and all too frequently
could not bear to confront this humiliating truth.

In Macbeth, the ambivalence is so prevalent that time itself becomes its representation, as Freud
obscurely senses. What Freud called Nachträglichkeit, a sense of belatedness, of always arriving after the event,
like a bad actor who invariably misses his cues, is the peculiar condition of Macbeth himself. Freud is
certainly shrewd to question the only apparent motivations of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, since the fruit of
their ambition is so dismal, and since Shakespeare enigmatically avoids defining the precise nature of their
desires. They do not share with Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Shakespeare's own Richard III the sense of glory
attendant upon the sweet fruition of an earthly crown. Why, after all, do they wish to become king and queen
of Scotland? The joyless dinner at which Banquo's ghost appears is doubtless typical of court life under
Macbeth, as drab as it is menacing. What Freud hints at is the essence of the play: childlessness, empty
ambition, and the butchery of the fatherly Duncan, so mild and good that neither of the Macbeths feels even
a touch of personal ambivalence toward him. But however they became childless, their revenge upon time is
usurpation, murder, and an attempt to cancel the future: all of those tomorrows and tomorrows and
tomorrows whose petty pace so oppresses Macbeth. On this tragedy at least, by reining in his interpretive
dogmatism, Freud has been profoundly suggestive.

What, besides his sense of the primacy of ambivalence and its apex in the Hamlet/Oedipus
complex, did Freud most owe (knowingly or not) to Shakespeare? I scarcely know how to begin to answer
that question: Shakespeare is everywhere in Freud, far more present when unmentioned than when he is
cited. Freud's fundamental stance toward Shakespeare is what he called "negation" (Verneinung), which is the
formulation of a previously repressed thought, feeling, or desire, one that enters consciousness only by being
disowned, so that defense or repression continues. The repressed is accepted intellectually but not
emotionally; Freud accepted Shakespearean ideas, even as he denied their source. Freud's drive for self-

preservation made it necessary for him to negate Shakespeare, yet he never ceased to identify himself, not
always consciously, with Hamlet, and to a lesser extent with Julius Caesar's Brutus, who was in Shakespeare's
development a kind of pre-Hamlet. Identification with Hamlet is, of course, hardly unique to Freud; it has
been universal, appearing in an amazing variety of persons at diverse times and places. Ernest Jones notes
that Freud's favorite quotation, in conversation or in writing, was Hamlet's admonition to Horatio:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

One sees why Freud made this an implicit motto for psychoanalysis, and it is even more apt when the context
is restored. Directly preceding it is this exchange:

Horatio. O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.

Hamlet. And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There is the miniature representation, for Freud, of the initial situation of psychoanalysis: Horatio stands for
the public, and Hamlet for Freud, urging the courteous welcome that strangers deserve. I cannot recall any
place in Freud's reported conversations or in his letters and other writings where he records what may well
have struck him as an invidious contrast: the resistance to psychoanalysis as compared to the almost universal
acceptance of Shakespeare, beginning in his own day and nation and culminating in worldwide apotheosis
during our time. I do remember that when Freud analyzed one of his own dreams, he found a comparison
for his relation to Shakespeare in Prince Hal's unconscious usurpation of kingship:

Wherever there is rank and promotion the way lies open for wishes that call for suppression.
Shakespeare's Prince Hal could not, even at his father's sick-bed, resist the temptation of
trying on the crown.

There is an old tradition that Shakespeare himself played the ghost of Hamlet's father in the first
production of Hamlet. Psychoanalysis, in many ways a reductive parody of Shakespeare, continues to be
haunted by Shakespeare's ghost. To put it another way, Shakespeare could be called a transcendental kind of psychoanalysis. When his characters change — or will themselves to change — in the course of overhearing themselves, they prophesy the psychoanalytic situation where the patient is compelled to overhear herself in the context of her transference to the analyst. Before Freud, Shakespeare was our prime authority on love and its vicissitudes, or upon the vicissitudes of the drive; clearly, he never ceased to guide Freud, and to this day he remains our best instructor.

Comparing Freud's two theories of anxiety, the revised account seems to me more Shakespearean than the earlier, rejected hypothesis. Before Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety (1926), Freud believed that neurotic and realistic anxiety could be rigidly distinguished from each other. Realistic anxiety was caused by true danger, while neurotic anxiety resulted from dammed-up libido or unsuccessful repression, and so was not involved in the civil wars of the psyche. After 1926, Freud abandoned the notion that libido can be transformed into anxiety. Instead, anxiety was seen as being prior to repression, and thus the motive for repression. In the earlier theory, repression preceded anxiety, which appeared only if repression failed. In the revised notion, Freud abandoned forever the causal distinction between real fear and neurotic anxiety.

Translated into Shakespeare's dramatic cosmos, the older theory is very much at home, particularly in the high tragedies that Freud preferred, where anxiety is as primal as ambivalence. Hamlet's Elsinore, Iago's Venice, Lear's and Edmund's Britain, Macbeth's Scotland: in all of these, playgoers and readers confront an atmosphere of anxiety that is antecedent to character and event. If the masterpiece of ambivalence is the Hamlet/Oedipus complex, the masterpiece of anxiety is what I want to call the Macbeth complex, because that hero-villain is Shakespeare's most anxious. In the Macbeth complex, dread cannot be distinguished from desire, and imagination becomes both invulnerable and malign. To fantasize, for Macbeth, is to have leaped over the will — to act without even having to will it — and arrive on the other side of having performed the act. The time is not free until Macbeth is slain, because temporal forebodings are always realized in his realm, even before he has usurped power. If the Hamlet/Oedipus complex conceals the wish to father oneself, the Macbeth complex barely hides the desire for self-destruction. Freud named it the Death Drive in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, but I prefer the doom-eagerness and atmospheric intensity conveyed by the Macbeth complex.

Though Freud never identified as fully with Macbeth as with Hamlet, there are some startling analogies that he cited, as when he prophesied the nearly thirty years of labor remaining for him, in a letter of 1910:

What is one to do on a day when thoughts cease to flow and the proper words won't come? One cannot help trembling at this possibility. That is why, despite the acquiescence in fate that becomes an upright man, I secretly pray: no infirmity, no paralysis of one's powers through bodily distress. We'll die with harness on, as King Macbeth said.

The affect there, with its noble humor, is rather different than in the usurper Macbeth's apocalyptic desperation:

I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun,  
And wish the estate o' th' world were now undone.  
Ring the alarum-bell! Blow wind, come wrack,  
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

Freud indeed died in full armor, thinking and writing virtually to the end. That his identification with Macbeth, however light, has its positive aspect is intimated by "as King Macbeth said." More than once, Freud asserted that envisioning the ranks of his own published works startled him into crying out, even as Macbeth did at the spectral line of Banquo's royal Stuart descendants, "What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?" Again the identification is light but proud, testifying to the contaminating power of Macbeth's imagination. Freud might say that the theme of Macbeth was childlessness, but on a deeper level he associated his own strength of imagination with Macbeth's, finding in the bloody tyrant and in himself both a heroic persistence and an image-making fecundity.
This has been only the preamble to a Shakespearean reading of Freud; the barest outlines of such a reading are too extensive to sketch here. Literary influence is still a process that we know little about, and even that little has to be speculative and tentative. Even after a quarter century, my skeptical attempts at a theory of influence are being badly misinterpreted. My studies are not Oedipal or Freudian, as some think, but Emersonian, made in the spirit of Emerson's great essay on Shakespeare in Representative Men. Freedom is wildness and originality is strangeness, and Shakespeare is the apotheosis of aesthetic freedom and originality. Freud was anxious about Shakespeare because he had learned anxiety from him, as he had learned ambivalence and narcissism and schism in the self. Emerson was freer and more original about Shakespeare because he had learned wildness and strangeness from him. It is appropriate that Emerson, rather than the equally canonical Freud, have the last word here: "Now, literature, philosophy, and thought, are Shakespearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see."

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