

Recognising Hamlet

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The idea of my writing about *Hamlet* failed to impress at least one potential reader: a novelist friend of mine dismissed with a cynical quip any expertise I might have hoped to imply in telling her the subject of my research: “*Everyone* is an expert on *Hamlet* – anyone who has had a minor Oedipal temper tantrum.” Though scholars would not necessarily be so quick to dismiss Hamlet’s turmoil, there is indeed something about the play that is deeply familiar. Commenting on the language and preoccupations of the play, Marjorie Garber writes that “the experience of *Hamlet* is almost always that of recognition ... It could be said that in the context of modern culture – global culture as well as Anglophone culture – one never does encounter *Hamlet* ‘for the first time’.”¹

Why is that? Why does it seem that Hamlet is so intimately familiar, and that we know the motives and impulses that are hidden even to Hamlet himself? Is it because we recognise in Shakespeare’s tragic hero the internal conflict between filial duty and inner yearnings, the self-doubt, and the fraught self-examination that have come to characterise existence in late modernity? Or is it simply because we have learned to see him, as Margreta de Grazia puts it, as “the most valued character in our cultural tradition”?² We all have a stake in this Hamlet, a character with “an inner being so transcendent, he barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges”. That “inner being” in the language of this play may seem familiar, more than four centuries after it was first performed, but the route to familiarity is a complex one, its insights self-reproducing. Shakespeare’s audiences would have brought perspectives of their own to this play, and the diverse sets of audience in the twenty-first century do the same. These interpretative frames are not internal to the play and the meanings they generate are not self-evident or inevitable. In tracing the history of critical responses it becomes feasible to open the gap between what we think we ‘know’ about Hamlet and the possibility that there are other ways of seeing him.

It may be obvious to audiences, since Freud, that Hamlet is caught in a vortex of tormented, inward-looking indecision and Oedipal self-doubt, but he only came to be that with the help of centuries of interpretation, bolstered by the preoccupations of, first, post-Enlightenment Europe and, second, Freudian and post-Freudian theories of subjectivity and sexuality. I would like to examine how Hamlet has been talked about through many decades of Shakespearean criticism and theatre-making, to consider how philosophers and theatre practitioners have contributed to the formation of this Hamlet, and then see where that might leave us, as twenty-first century inheritors of this play.

What is clear is that modern audiences and scholars still find *Hamlet* a compelling and thought-provoking play. For a long time it has been the most frequently staged of Shakespeare’s plays, and it is almost always in performance somewhere across the globe.³ It also offers the ultimate role for a male stage actor worth his salt: consider the career-building performances by, for instance, Edward Booth (1870), John Gielgud (1936) and Laurence Olivier (on stage in 1937

1. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Random House, 2004), 466.

2. Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

3. See Rebecca Brown’s account of the performance history of the play on the Royal Shakespeare Company website: “*Hamlet*: Stage history”, 19th October 2012. Online: <http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/hamlet/stage-history.aspx>.

and on film in 1948). Gielgud's staging of *Hamlet* in 1931 was the first play to be transferred from the Old Vic Theatre to the West End in London; his strong association with Hamlet is what ultimately set him up as an early version of the celebrity actor. Contemporary actors, too, speak about the role as if the power of the performance inheres in the character himself. This is how a very contemporary Hamlet, Jude Law, describes the particular thrill of playing Hamlet, in an interview with Adam Green in *Vogue* magazine:

Someone once told me that you don't play Hamlet – Hamlet plays you ... He demands such a reveal of your inner feelings and thoughts that you have to open yourself up to him and see where he takes you ... You see Hamlet struggling with these questions about why we're here and what the work of life is, but ultimately, as with all great writing, the answers are really left up to us. At the heart of this character is someone we all recognize as ourselves.⁴

What the actor feels he recognises in the character is the internal wrestling and seemingly universal existential angst that does not need further explanation. This Hamlet seems to have an almost spiritual hold, so deeply does he see into the psychic struggles of actors and audiences alike. But even a brief look into performance history over the last 100 years or so demonstrates that the Hamlet “we” seem to “recognize as ourselves” is one that came into being through specific staging interventions that secured a firm relationship between the play, Freudian psychoanalysis and the preoccupations of theatre-makers.

A key figure in the development of this Oedipal Hamlet is Sir Laurence Olivier. Philip Weller offers an account of Olivier's appropriation of psychoanalysis in his bid to develop his own, distinctive incarnation of Hamlet after John Gielgud's legendary performances at the Old Vic in 1931 and on Broadway in 1936. Olivier's Hamlet in the 1937 production at the Old Vic was to be the making both of Olivier as a serious actor and of the Hamlet familiar to twenty-first-century audiences: “Tyrone Guthrie directed Laurence Olivier's attention to Ernest Jones's book, *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, which contained the article on ‘Hamlet and Oedipus.’ And the stage and film history of *Hamlet* took a decisive turn – for better or worse.”⁵ Weller thus attributes the “decisive turn” in modern constructions of Hamlet to Olivier's powerful incarnation as Hamlet. He goes on to explain, however, that it was only in Olivier's 1948 film version that his unmistakably Oedipal Hamlet was more fully realised, through canny filmic devices – lingering close-ups of the royal bed, more than one “suggestive embrace between mother and son”, and the casting of a 27-year old Gertrude to Olivier's 40-year old Hamlet. In an extended and careful analysis of Olivier's film, Peter Donaldson, too, explains how the psychoanalytical framework provided by Ernest Jones saved the day for Olivier, an actor who didn't fit the prevailing understanding of Hamlet as sensitive and incapable of action, resulting from Gielgud's success in the role. Olivier's “athletic” Hamlet could be a man of decisive action, capable of anything – except the avenging of acts, his conscience intuited, that were in keeping with his own repressed desires: “An important consequence of [the Oedipal] theory for the acting of the role is that it provides a rationale for playing Hamlet as a decisive, vigorous personality, disturbed by the intrusion of these special and psychologically distressing circumstances.”⁶ Oedipus offers an explanation for this vigorous Hamlet's indecision in the matter of avenging his father's death – he can't kill the usurping Claudius because he unconsciously identifies with him. But, argues Donaldson, Olivier's *Hamlet* involved heavy-handed interventions: “He drastically cut Shakespeare's text and imposed on it a powerful interpretation, partly Jonesian, partly his own.”

4. In Adam Green, “Jude Law: You don't play Hamlet, Hamlet plays you”, *Vogue*, 9th September 2009. Online: <http://www.justjared.com/2009/09/29/jude-law-vogue/>

5. Philip Weller, “Freud's Footsteps in Films of *Hamlet*” in *Literature-Film Quarterly* 25.2 (1997): 120.

6. Peter Donaldson, “Olivier, Hamlet and Freud” in *Cinema Journal* 26.4 (1987): 30. Donaldson's account shows how Olivier's own life story mimics elements of the Oedipal pattern and provides a detailed description of Olivier's strategies for infusing Oedipus into his 1948 film version of *Hamlet*.

For Weller the only reason to “allow” the imposition of psychoanalysis onto a character in this fashion is “the necessary artistic freedom of modern actors and directors” or, in quoting Norman Holland, to “make the play ‘come alive’”.⁷ And yet, Weller insists, to invoke psychoanalysis as an interpretative tool in such a heavy-handed fashion does not constitute faithful representation of the discipline’s subtleties (after all, “unconscious problems are unconscious”). Nor does it do justice to the drama itself: “Hamlet cannot explain himself to himself, and if we do it for him, we reduce his drama to a sad case of an untreated illness.” And yet Weller is resigned, finally, to the inevitability of this coupling of Freud with Shakespeare’s best-loved drama, for the foreseeable future at least: “for now it looks as if the bed, and all that go with it, are here to stay. Both Hamlet and Freud are cultural icons, and Laurence Olivier, aided by modern sensibilities, seems to have forged an iron link between the two”.⁸ And yet perhaps there is no need for resignation. The Oedipal framework persists in performances of Hamlet, precisely because it seems so familiar that its constructedness is hardly visible. It becomes possible to see how this myth has been created and sustained in popular culture by prodding it just a little, for example by examining the influence of theatre-makers on how Hamlet has come to be understood and by extending the view to be able to take note of the distinct “Hamlets” generated within alternative interpretative contexts across the globe.

What of Hamlet’s status in the world of the academy? Scholars still have so much more to say about him, as is borne out by a statistical survey of submissions to *Shakespeare Quarterly* during 2010.⁹ At 48, unsolicited articles about *Hamlet* were by far in the majority. The next most researched play, *Othello*, yielded only 28 articles. The ratio becomes even more dramatic in respect of articles accepted for publication on the basis of assessors’ reports: 14 articles about *Hamlet* were accepted, whereas the next closest had six.¹⁰ What is it about *Hamlet* – and what is it about the principal character – that is so compelling that scholars, theatre practitioners and audiences return to the play repeatedly? Perhaps it should not be surprising that Hamlet be recognised as such a significant, substantial character: the play offers him more air time, proportionally, than any of Shakespeare’s other characters. He is given more words, more questions, and more soliloquies with which to address himself to his audience. More than a third of the play’s lines are spoken by him. We are given access to his inner questioning and to his struggle to fit himself to appearances. His meditations on how to “be” in the world have lent themselves to reflections by others on larger metaphysical questions. This is not necessarily because of the rich, brooding quality of his internal world, per se, but because he draws attention to it. It might be this that most sets him apart: the explicit attempt we see, in Hamlet, to try to find a language to talk about the self. He approaches his own quandary with the probing sensibilities of a scholar, but without resting in the apparent certainties of book learning. So in that sense his preoccupations with the contradiction between truth and appearances, the difference between wisdom acquired through learning and that which is acquired through experience, the gap between society’s expectations and individual yearnings, and the mediating role of the family in this, have particularly resonated for scholars and for theatregoers. Far from undermining his coherence as a subject, his self-doubt and his questioning of certainty on the road to self-knowledge in fact secure it. It is precisely the questioning and self-doubt that has made him a figure for the kind of subjectivity that has come to be seen as ‘modern’, with its self-consciousness and self-reflexivity.

7. Weller, “Freud’s Footsteps in Films of *Hamlet*”: 123. See Norman Holland, “Freud on Shakespeare” in *PMLA* 75.3 (1960): 163-73.

8. *Ibid.*: 124.

9. I thank David Schalkwyk, former editor of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, for sharing these statistics with me informally.

10. The 2011 special issue, *Surviving Hamlet*, was put together by virtue of the strength and number of these unsolicited submissions and not as a result of a call for papers, as per the usual mechanism for a special edition.

Marjorie Garber has called Hamlet the “premier western performance of consciousness”.¹¹ Her care in signalling the specifically western nature of this interiority alerts us to the *particularity* of the philosophical tradition that conceives of subjectivity in such individualistic terms and, since Freud, through a psychoanalytical lens that deems desire and repression fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity. For much of the twentieth century, Shakespearean criticism seemed to affirm Shakespeare’s genius and strengthen his association with a sentimentalised, necessarily male, individualistic subject. Increasingly, however, Shakespearean scholars have distanced themselves from this mode. Recent decades have established a marked critical distance from what Graham Holderness in 1988 called “bardolatry” – the “myth of Shakespeare as cultural hero, as transcendent genius and omniscient seer”.¹² This myth incorporates, too, the elevated subjectivity that Shakespeare was assumed to underwrite: the late Joel Fineman described the “sentimental allegiance to the idea and the idealization of the autonomous human and humanist subject” as “the greatest weakness of much contemporary Shakespearean criticism”.¹³

If the “Shakespearean subject”, and Hamlet in particular, provided the dominant image of modern subjectivity for much of the twentieth century, what has it taken to imagine him differently? It has been possible to identify some of the steps in “Hamlet’s” development, in keeping with the preoccupations and influences of distinct historical periods. This creates space for alternative ways of seeing. Tracing the trajectory of Hamlet’s journey to the place he occupies within our cultural imagination works to demystify him somewhat and open up new possibilities for imagining him in the twenty-first century. Margreta de Grazia has spent the last couple of decades doing just that, initially through examining editing practices – that is, the way the plays have evolved and solidified under the signature of something we now know as “Shakespeare” through the work of his eighteenth-century editors, in particular Samuel Johnson and his *Complete Works*. More recently she has turned her critical lens to the increasing “abstraction” of Hamlet, the character, from the rest of the play.¹⁴ His “disengagement from the land-driven plot” has the effect of depoliticising the play as a whole and removing the fraught social dynamics from view.¹⁵ The “abstraction of the main character” is also a “precondition for

11. Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, 4.

12. Graham Holderness, “Bardolatry: or, the cultural materialist’s guide to Stratford-Upon-Avon” in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 12.

13. Joel Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), 7. Holderness and Fineman’s respective critiques were arguably not so much catalysts but indications of a new wave of more politically inflected materialist and historicist scholarship, reflected also in Catherine Belsey’s prior attempt to historicise the construction of the subject in the early modern period in *The Subject of Tragedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985) and in the upsurge of publications that followed, with essay collections like Ivo Kamp’s *Materialist Shakespeare: A history* (New York and London: Verso, 1995; see, in particular, the essay by Katherine Maus that places Hamlet’s inwardness within the context of English Renaissance social culture), and more recently Jean Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow’s collection, *Marxist Shakespeares* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), as well as monographs such as Lisa Jardine’s *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), in which a chapter on *Hamlet* makes a case for understanding the “unlawful marriage” of its title as a “cultural and historical” matter rather than reason to accuse the character of Gertrude. More recently still, scholars have been alive to the issues of power in *Hamlet* (see Anselm Haverkamp’s Foucauldian interpretations in “The Ghost of History: Hamlet and the Politics of Paternity” in his monograph *Shakespearean Genealogies of Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012) and a collection edited by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus that attempts to unravel entirely Shakespeare’s association with humanism, *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

14. De Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet*, 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 1

the modernity ascribed to him”.¹⁶ The relationship of influence works in both directions, however: Hamlet himself offers to modern conceptualisations of subjectivity a peculiarly agonising and self-conscious interiority. But the most powerful narrative influencing what can be seen of Hamlet is the paradigm of psychoanalysis. Since Freud, Hamlet’s psyche, removed from the political plot, has become an inexhaustible site of interpretation. Before I turn to Freud to see what he makes of Hamlet, I would like to highlight two significant implications from De Grazia’s recent work.

First, *Hamlet* was not always interpreted in this way, nor was it much admired as a play. Shakespeare’s contemporaries were not uniformly generous in their responses, and some condemned it as “backward” and “antiquated” for its fixation with murder, madness and revenge. Samuel Johnson, editor of Shakespeare’s *Complete Works*, disassociates his eighteenth-century England from Shakespeare’s barbarous times: “The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity.”¹⁷ But in the early nineteenth century, Coleridge was able to find in Shakespeare a language and a paradigm he could identify as truly “modern.” The terms of his estimation elevated Shakespeare above his contemporaries and inaugurated a new idealisation of the capacity for reflection that becomes associated with the quality of being human in this period. Coleridge’s treatment of Hamlet as an inspiration for a particular kind of introspective subjectivity changes him: once Hamlet is “perceived as psychological, *Hamlet* begins to look contemporary”.¹⁸ It also transforms Shakespeare. The discovery of the “psychological” in Hamlet, De Grazia argues, is what “lifted Shakespeare out of his dramatic contest with the ancients”. The celebration of Hamlet in these terms thus took place at a particular moment and with the help of a new language of interiority that detached the psyche from social conditions and gave birth to the new bourgeois subject and with it the icon Shakespeare.

Second, De Grazia would have us recognise that the critical fascination with Hamlet’s “antic disposition” (1.5.192) – his apparent madness, initially feigned – and with what goes on in his psyche, has had the regrettable effect of making psychic disorder the overarching preoccupation of Hamlet criticism. This has made it hard to read Hamlet’s behaviour as satire and harder still to recognise the play’s critique of power and the social conditions which give rise to Hamlet’s malaise. De Grazia accuses generations of critics of misreading Hamlet’s odd behaviour as signs of “psychic disorder” because the interpretative framework that they are using is so highly individualised. In truth, she argues, these “irregularities” are the “signature stunts and riffs of the Clown, madman, Vice, and the devil: all stock figures of privation [in Elizabethan theatre practice] and therefore suitable role models for the dispossessed prince”.¹⁹ The intense, exclusive focus on Hamlet’s psyche – and his madness, feigned or otherwise – emerges out of misreadings that ordinary members of Shakespeare’s audiences are less likely to have fallen into because they would have been familiar with the figures of satire most frequently drawn upon in Elizabethan theatre.

De Grazia alleges that Hamlet’s interiority has been focused on to the exclusion of all else. And yet, if we examine Hamlet’s soliloquies, we might well find grounds for thinking of this play as preoccupied with the struggle to articulate what goes on ‘inside’. Critical responses to De Grazia’s work have also resisted her provocative attempt to treat Hamlet as incidental to the play: for example, even as Richard Halperin affirms De Grazia’s primary critique, he “insist[s] that Hamlet remains the center of *Hamlet* – that his paradigmatic status as modern individual is

16. As De Grazia shows, this is in keeping with accounts of the “grand narratives of history”: for Karl Marx the “delinking” of human beings from land becomes a precondition for modern social and economic organisation.

17. In *Hamlet without Hamlet*, 9.

18. *Ibid.*, 18.

19. *Ibid.*, 5

conditioned and contextualized rather than subverted by the play's attention to impersonal process".²⁰ And yet De Grazia's objection to prior generations of scholars, in arguing that all too often the "inner" world is excised from the social, certainly holds. What is needed, in fact, is a more nuanced way to think of the two realms as entangled and mutually formative, in the hope of being able to think about Hamlet's malaise, and his struggle to represent that malaise "truly", without ignoring the problems of power, illegitimate authority and dispossession. For Halperin this is a false contest. Instead, he reads *Hamlet* as instigating a productive tension between the "more intuitive" but nonetheless limiting "contest of action versus character" by attending to the play's engagement with the political economy of theatre-making.²¹

If we bear in mind that Hamlet comes to us via the theatre, it becomes easier to see that we don't have access to Hamlet's 'real' interior. Nor is there a 'real' interior that hasn't been drawn through Hamlet's words. Rather, as David Schalkwyk has shown, what is noteworthy about Shakespeare's play is the attempt to register, in the theatre's very public scene of articulation, the difficulty of representing feeling and consciousness, particularly where public life is besieged and the body politic has turned "rotten" (1.4.90).²² *Hamlet* isn't so much about the *nature* of inwardness, per se, as an opportunity to think about the *language* of subjectivity, spoken outwardly.

Hamlet has given critics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries rich opportunities to reflect on the capacity of language to give representation to interiority – the relationship, in other words, of inner feeling to its expression. And it may turn out that this is Shakespeare's true achievement in the play: his contribution to the development of a poetic subjectivity, as Schalkwyk invites us to see. When Hamlet challenges the inadequacy of words and mourning practices to give expression to his grief, he powerfully registers his protest at a society in which the private realm of grief has become taken over by the imperative to display acquiescence to an ill-gotten sovereignty. Hamlet's challenge does not constitute a repudiation of public expressivity in favour of an 'authentic' inner realm. By the same token, Shakespeare's feat is not the invention of interiority, as though humans had not been capable of this before 1600:

To invent poetic subjectivity is not the same thing as inventing human subjectivity. Shakespeare is remarkable for showing us, both theatrically and poetically, the rich drama of both public and private life as it is enacted and embodied in the language games and speech acts that constitute language in its relation to lived experience. In a special sense, then, interiority is not opposed to theatricality: it is inextricably imbricated in it.²³

In responding to Gertrude's appeal that he put aside his "so particular" grief ("cast thy nightly colour off", 1.2.68-75), Hamlet's retort demonstrates something of the tension and mutuality of this relationship between form and feeling, that is, between the external "trappings" of grief (1.2.86) and "that within which passeth show" (1.2.85) and, in doing so, brings the question of expressibility to our attention. In this exchange Hamlet offers a devastating condemnation of the deficiency of *mere* display and *empty* form, but he also powerfully draws attention to the phenomenon of form and its relationship to inner feeling – the difference between what "seems" and what "is" (1.2.77), which is a central preoccupation of literature and literary studies. Even as he refuses the emptiness of displays of mourning – the "inky" black cloak, the "river" of tears, the dejected behaviour and all "shows of grief" which "alone" cannot "denote me truly" – his words nonetheless give expression to his grief and to his right to mourn, regardless of the needs

20. Richard Halperin, "The Eclipse of Action: 'Hamlet' and the political economy of playing" in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.4 (2008): 466.

21. *Ibid.*: 473.

22. David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Schalkwyk troubles the opposition between inner and outer by reminding us that interiority "is a function of linguistic use in publicly accessible contexts" (109).

23. *Ibid.*, 110.

of what Gertrude euphemistically calls “Denmark”. His “woe” comes into consciousness precisely through the words used to speak about it, even when those words seem to disavow the glib “trappings” or “forms” of grief. But this is not to say Hamlet rejects language and the social practice of grief in favour of the mystery of that which escapes language – as though outward and inward worlds were wholly separate.

We come to regard Hamlet’s “interiority” only because he presents it to us for reflection – and this, I have suggested, is Shakespeare’s achievement: bringing into public view the language of subjectivity. But his is an interiority that is related to social context, as Schalkwyk argues in his recent study of the significance of Shakespeare for Nelson Mandela and his comrades imprisoned on Robben Island: “Hamlet’s Denmark ... imposes upon everyone the relentless scrutiny of a public gaze. This is not to say that Shakespeare’s play anachronistically calls for a Romantic withdrawal into a secure private world untouched by the public or political realm. Rather, *Hamlet* reveals the political nature of even the most private relations.”²⁴ Hamlet’s discourses reflect his own struggle to manage the impact of the fraught political context on his inner world.

The shortcoming of decades of Shakespearean scholarship and theatre practice, then, is not an immoderate focus on Hamlet’s inner world, per se, but the pervasive assumption that his interiority is somehow divorced from its political context, that it shelters the ‘real’ Hamlet, or that it offers an effective retreat from an oppressive social system. ‘Inner’ and ‘outer’ are both subject to the vagaries of history, that is, the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and its “sea of troubles” (3.1.59-60). Treating interiority (or the expression of interiority) as, amongst other things, subject to history brings into view the political pressures with which Hamlet was wrestling. Freud’s prodigious influence on decades of theatre practice and scholarship, however, has militated against this wider view.

Oedipus

Freud’s deployment of Hamlet in expounding his theory of the Oedipal complex has had a massive impact on how Hamlet is commonly understood and the place Hamlet has come to occupy in popular culture over the last century or so, though this has come at a price, entrenching the interpretative frame.

After discussing the myth of Oedipus Rex in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud turns to Shakespeare’s play, distinguishing it from the ancient myth of Oedipus but, even as he does so, entrenching their connection:

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.²⁵

In Freud’s account, Hamlet’s inability to act is tied to “phantasy”. It is precisely the “inhibiting consequences” – his inaction – that point to Hamlet’s repressed identification with Claudius. The play itself becomes a sign of the “advance” of repression; in contrast to *Oedipus Rex*, Hamlet’s Oedipal conflict is located in the unconscious.

This early exposition of his repressive hypothesis was written in 1899. Prior to that, however, in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, dated October 15, 1897, he recounts his experience of watching a performance of *Hamlet* and the revelation that comes to him:

24. Schalkwyk, “Hamlet’s Dreams” in *Social Dynamics* 32.2 (2006): 116.

25. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1995), 264.

Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy, and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one.

Fleetingly the thought passed through my head that the same thing might be at the bottom of Hamlet as well. I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intentions, but believe, rather, that a real event stimulated the poet to his representation, in that his unconscious understood the unconscious of his hero.²⁶

With logic that can only be described as circular, Freud saw in Hamlet evidence of the psychic theory that his reading of *Hamlet* helped him to conceptualise. In fact, the acclaimed psychoanalytical critic, Norman Holland, writing in 1964, understood the direction of debt in this way: "It is not so much that Freud brought the Oedipus complex to *Hamlet* as that *Hamlet* brought the Oedipus complex to Freud."²⁷ More recent scholarship is not as quick to credit *Hamlet* with generating Freud's ideas or to assume that an appreciation of psychoanalytic theory presupposes an acceptance of Freud's literary interpretation. In *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis*, for example, Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard trace the place of *Hamlet* (and *King Lear*) in Freudian theory and find that although Shakespeare and psychoanalysis are "kindred discourses", "it is precisely in its engagement with Shakespeare that psychoanalysis comes up against the limit of Oedipal narrative."²⁸ Cynthia Marshall has shown how Freud's engagement with Shakespeare is evidently provisional, rather than authoritative, and shot through with autobiographical reflections and assumptions about Shakespeare's own autobiography: "Freud reading *Hamlet* as civilization's advanced version of *Oedipus* was also Freud reading his own early encounters with Shakespearean drama."²⁹

Nonetheless, Hamlet remains a compelling figure for those engaged with Oedipal theory. Some feminists, wrestling with the harsher implications of Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal myth, also slip into the circularity of Freud's argumentation by holding up *Hamlet* as evidence of the hypothesis that it engendered, even when questioning the implications of Freud's reading of the play for its misogyny and normativity. Notice the circularity here in a passage from Janet Adelman (emphasis added):

Literalized in the plot, the splitting of the father thus evokes the *ordinary psychological crisis* in which the son discovers the sexuality of his parents, but with the blame handily shifted from father onto another man as unlike father as possible – and yet as like, hence his brother; in effect, the plot itself serves as a cover-up, legitimizing disgust at paternal sexuality without implicating the idealized father.³⁰

Thus Hamlet (the character) becomes the exemplar of "the ordinary psychological crisis", "literalized in the plot", that engendered Freud's understanding of this crisis in the first place. Now so familiar it barely needs further explanation, the contours of his psychic crisis are made universally applicable and true for all time. And yet this 'universality' emerges out of Freud's very particular reading of the play. It is worth noting that the Algerian psychologist and radical

26. Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904*, ed. J.M Masson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

27. Norman Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 59.

28. Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.

29. Cynthia Marshall, "Psychoanalysing the Prepsychoanalytic Subject" in *PMLA* 117.5 (2002): 1209-1210.

30. Janet Adelman, "'Man and wife is one flesh': *Hamlet* and the confrontation with the maternal body" in *Hamlet* ed. Susan Wofford (Boston: St Martins/Bedford, 1994), 263.

anti-colonialist, Franz Fanon, rejected Oedipus and what he called its false claim to universal applicability.³¹

My contention is not that it is ‘wrong’ or illegitimate to use Shakespeare in this way. But the larger claims which seem to accompany an Oedipal Hamlet are not as dependable as they have come to seem, after decades of repetition – claims, for example, that Shakespeare’s play gives expression to a universal human condition and that Shakespeare was ahead of his time. These claims make it hard to recognise that Shakespeare’s play has had its own biography and that the way it has been received and performed over centuries has been born of the preoccupations of each historical moment.

Theatre practice

This overwhelming preoccupation with Hamlet’s interiority, excised from its social context, has been fostered over decades of criticism and theatre practice. For example, in the 2009 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of *Hamlet*, director Gregory Doran made very particular choices in constructing his inward-looking hero, as Carolyn Sale has demonstrated. Doran cut precisely those lines from Hamlet’s best-known soliloquy that signal Hamlet’s concern with others and his awareness of those who labour:

Cut from Gregory Doran’s production ... are the seven lines that link Hamlet’s tortured consciousness, in his most famous soliloquy, to the concerns of others, ranging from those suffering from “the oppressor’s wrong” or “the law’s delay” to those “grunt[ing] and sweat [ing] under a weary life” (3.1.70-76). It is hard to imagine why Doran needed these seven lines to go. What could the cuts possibly have been designed to gain? A minute of playing time?³²

Any attempt to explain these excisions as timesaving measures would be unconvincing, as Sale’s remarks suggest. Clearly there is another rationale at work, informed by a commitment to the detached, self-preoccupied Hamlet that audiences have come to value.

Again, this is not to say that Doran’s interventions are ‘wrong’ or that he is not free to make them. His excisions merely demonstrate that staging decisions contribute to the creation of a very particular incarnation of Hamlet, a long way off from the character that began to take shape with the First Quarto in 1603. Doran himself would acknowledge as much. He articulates his rationale for making these particular cuts in this way:

In our *Hamlet*, we’ve cut the play-within-a-play quite drastically, but unless you know *Hamlet* intimately you probably won’t notice that. We’ve kept the opening battlements scene and Fortinbras, Voltmand, Cornelius and Reynaldo. Perhaps the most radical thing we’ve done is move the “To be or not to be” speech from after the point at which the players arrive at Elsinore to before, to the moment just after Hamlet has seen the ghost of his father. It is the cold light of day. He is in a bleak place. It feels more psychologically ‘right’ than in the versions that have that speech occurring after his spirited attempts to expose Claudius.

Deciding what to cut depends on what your priorities are. As Jan Kott wrote in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, an inevitably shortened *Hamlet* “will always be a poorer *Hamlet* than Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is; but it may also be a *Hamlet* enriched by being in our time”.³³

31. See Andreas Bertoldi, “Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis and the Colonial Encounter: The case of Wulf Sachs’s Black Hamlet” in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 237.

32. Carolyn Sale, “Capital against Capital: Shakespeare after globalization” (Unpublished paper, International Shakespeare Association Conference: Prague 2011), 5.

33. In Natalie Hanman, “Who He? RSC tries to save Tennant’s Hamlet from his fans” in *The Guardian*, 5th August 2008. Online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/aug/05/david.tennant.hamlet>

Doran is at liberty to make whichever staging choices he would like to, according to his creative vision. And his choice to move the famous soliloquy is not as radical as he suggests, given that it appears in this way in the 1603 First Quarto version of the play, and has become an alternative staging choice.³⁴ But it is worth noting the terms in which he offers an explanation – that it “feels more psychologically ‘right’” – and reflecting on the effects of his projection of this psychologised vision onto Hamlet and onto *Hamlet*. Moving the famous soliloquy away from its placement in the midst of the action of the play into a moment of even greater solitude turns his suicidal indecision into a direct response to the shock of seeing the ghost of his father. Obliterating the presence of the labouring classes from Hamlet’s attentions has implications for cultural politics, too: for Sale, “Doran’s *Hamlet* licenses those who do get to experience the play in performance to dismiss such people from their imaginations”.³⁵

Theatre critics, too, participate in the creation of this insistently Oedipal Hamlet as the faithful depiction of Shakespeare’s hero. Paul Taylor declared Alan Rickman’s 1992 Hamlet “a prince short of passion”, denouncing him, in part, on the grounds that his verbal wrangling with Gertrude, played in this production with both mother and son on all fours, demonstrated a “great deal of effort, but next to no oedipal charge”.³⁶ Hamlet is thus not really Hamlet without outward evidence of his internal psychological struggle, rendered in specifically Freudian terms. And yet increasingly theatre practitioners are choosing to deliver alternative or multifaceted interpretations, drawing attention to Hamlet’s internal struggles as well as the play’s discomfiting exposé of the effects of illegitimate social power. Likewise, while Kenneth Branagh’s on-screen Hamlet (1996) was “played in such a way as to bring out the multiple dimensions of a tortured psyche,” writes Mark Burnett, “the film is arguably more obviously dominated by its political resonances. For this *Hamlet* constructs Denmark as a militaristic state ... It is to Branagh’s credit that he has restored to *Hamlet* its military subtexts.”³⁷ Even more so, one might argue, the National Theatre production of *Hamlet* in 2010 created a repressive Denmark whose political system depended upon mechanisms of surveillance and control. Hamlet was never alone on stage. The paranoia of an illegitimate ruler was signalled in the presence of a security guard or informer in every scene. Rory Kinnear’s Hamlet was unquestionably intense and anguished, but his struggle was placed within a context of hyper-surveillance and political tension. As a result, the production became a comment on dispossession and the abuse of power. Hamlet’s feigned madness seemed a sensible strategy; his alienation was understandable, given the transformation of Elsinore into a veritable police state, in a damning indictment on repressive political regimes.

Dissident theatre-makers working under tyrannical regimes have long understood the implicit social critique in the play. At a gathering of the International Shakespeare Association in Prague in 2011, delegates were treated to a conversation about theatre production “In the Cold War Years” between theatre directors Vlasta Gallorová (of the Kolowrat Theatre in Prague), Karel Kříž (of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) and Robert Sturua (of the Shota Rustaveli Dramatic Theatre in Georgia, Eastern Europe). For these directors, *Hamlet* had been a symbol of freedom from tyranny and an effective vehicle for protest. Stalin agreed: he famously hated the play and from 1932 to 1954, any staging of *Hamlet* in Soviet Russia was forbidden (Stalin died in 1953). The directors spoke of their strategies for making the play function as a biting critique of authoritarian power, what Ann Jennalie Cook, in introducing them, called

34. See Neil Taylor and Ann Thompson’s “Introduction” to *Hamlet: The texts of 1603 and 1623* (London: Arden, 2006), 14 and their list of significant “Q1 productions” (38-39).

35. Sale, “Capital against Capital”, 6.

36. Paul Taylor, “A Miss, a Very Palpable Miss” in *The Independent*, 17th September 1992. Online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre--a-miss-a-very-palpable-miss-paul-taylor-reviews-alan-rickmans-hamlet-at-the-riverside-studios-directed-by-georgian-robert-sturua-and-finds-a-prince-short-of-passion-1551864.html>.

37. Mark Thornton Burnett, “The ‘very cunning of the scene’: Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet*” in *Literature-Film Quarterly* 25.2 (1992): 78.

“tapping the subversive potential inherent in the play”. Sturua gave an example of a production that gave striking expression to the relationship between individuals and the social order where the body politic was compromised: on a stark Brechtian stage, a pool of blood remained throughout the performance, and as the characters moved through their actions, each of them walked through the blood, leaving red footprints across the stage, a reminder of the tacit complicity of each citizen surviving under a brutal regime.³⁸

The South African Baxter Theatre/RSC production of *Hamlet* in 2006 also highlighted the abuse of power. Critics were quick to pick up, in John Kani’s Claudius, echoes of Zimbabwe’s aging dictator Robert Mugabe. For director Janet Suzman, the parallels are articulated in terms of power: “Tyranny is also at home in Africa.”³⁹ For Peter Holland, however, the significant parallel to be identified is between the “righteous old Hamlet, doubled with Claudius by John Kani” and Nelson Mandela. This would seem to suggest that the interpretative resonances are shared in both directions: Mandela lends to Old Hamlet his righteous dignity and statesmanship. The appearance of Vaneshran Arumugam’s Hamlet in the garb of a prisoner turns his “antic disposition” into the subversive strategies of a political activist.⁴⁰ Holland finds the South Africa-specific sub-texts difficult to decode: “Clearly [Hamlet] is reiterating in another register his sense that Denmark is a prison, and that he is being detained in Elsinore against his will, but what other connotations does this particular kit bring with it in South Africa?” Holland wonders what African language Claudius uses to pray, registering subtly, as he does so, a sense of exclusion. Staging decisions that locate the play so specifically have implications for its mobility. The difficulty of cultural translation has always been there, of course, but not always as visibly.

In the 400-odd years of its life, *Hamlet* has travelled far from Stratford and had to accommodate appropriations beyond what its playwright could possibly have foreseen. The play has found its way into multiple contexts across the globe. Its hero has become “our Hamlet” through a myriad of localised interpretations and adaptations that are able to draw on myths and interpretative traditions – in a manner not dissimilar, perhaps, from Freud’s use of Oedipus. In India, for example, Hamlet has often been read in light of the epic *Mahabharata*, perhaps best known in Sanskrit literature for Krishna’s “Dialogue of the Soul”. Here Krishna advises the warrior, Arijuna, to do battle with his kin so that good may triumph over evil. Krishna offers Arijuna the perspective that allows him the impetus to loosen his attachments. This perspective, rooted in the spirituality with which he is able to make sense of himself and his world, liberates him to act in accordance with dharma (duty or fate) rather than an individualised “I”. This “indigenized” Hamlet, as Poonam Trivedi might describe it, is far removed from the Hamlet that has emerged out of a cultural and philosophical tradition that looks to Freud for its interpretative framework.⁴¹ Another useful example is Martin Orkin’s discussion of the response by an

38. Emerging out of this tradition, too, is Grigori Kozintsev’s famous Russian film version in 1964, using Pasternak’s translation and set to a score by Dmitri Shostakovich. Kozintsev politicised the play where Olivier’s 1948 film had deliberately focused on Hamlet’s individual, private turmoil.

39. In David Blair, “Shakespeare, the Storyteller of Africa” in *The Telegraph*, 19th April 2006. Online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3651690/Shakespeare-the-storyteller-of-Africa.html>

40. Peter Holland, “Theatres for Shakespeare” in *Shakespeare Survey* 60 (2007): 291.

41. I thank Poonam Trivedi for her generous and detailed explanation of the influence of this interpretative framework for *Hamlet* in India. For further insights into what Trivedi has called “indigenized” Shakespeares, see her essays, “Interculturalism or Indigenization: Modes of exchange, Shakespeare East and West” in *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Performance* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000: 73-882000) and “Reading ‘Other’ Shakespeares” in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance across media, genres and cultures*, Pascale Aebischer et al (New York: Palgrave, 2003). Elsewhere she has explored the ambiguous term “folk Shakespeare” to claim an “adaptive, indigenized staging of Shakespeare” which, she argues, is not new in India, though in the past “academia has largely ignored or dismissed it as ‘not Shakespeare.’” (“Folk Shakespeare”: The performance of Shakespeare in traditional Indian theater forms” in *India’s Shakespeare*, ed. Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 172 and 174.)

American anthropologist (described in an essay by Laura Bohannan in 1974) to *Hamlet* as performed by a group of West Africans known as the “Tiv”. Orkin lays bare the limitations, or at least the *particularity*, of predictable interpretative frameworks, and underscores the impossibility of a universally recognisable *Hamlet*.⁴²

The influence of historical context on what can be seen in any given literary work is particularly clear in respect of drama, which, by definition, is only ever fully realised in the moment of performance, thanks also to the enabling but ephemeral presence of a particular audience. What we recognise in *Hamlet*, it turns out, is as provisional, as located and as specific as the cultural context in which we have come to ‘know’ him, and ourselves.

Taking liberties

It is not just *Hamlet*, then, that finds himself shaped by history. Criticism and theatre practice are themselves products of their time, and need to be received with critical circumspection. This is not to say we need to try harder to identify and reproduce a better or more ‘authentic’ *Hamlet*. On the contrary, we need the latitude to play with Shakespeare and the freedom not to treat him as a “our guru”⁴³ but to use his work as a resource and as an opportunity to explore what is most compelling, and perhaps what is most troubling, about cultural and political life. There is space for even *more* innovative theatre and the possibility of new interpretations, but not in the name of affirming the cliché that Shakespeare is “our contemporary” (in Jan Kott’s terms) nor as an affirmation that he remains always ‘relevant’ and self-renewing, as if there has been no intervening creative input translating his work into each particular ‘here’ and ‘now’.⁴⁴

The sense of recognition that *Hamlet* seems to induce may have less to do with an ability to fathom *Hamlet*’s inner world than we might like to think. Gary Taylor tells us that “we find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values. And it is no use pretending that some uniquely clever, honest and disciplined critic can find a technique, an angle, that will enable us to lead a mass escape from this trap.” In truth it is not so much a trap as an opportunity to do with Shakespeare what we will, but to do so consciously, careful not to assume that Shakespeare and his cast of compelling characters can speak for all people and for all time. Instead of deferring to the legacy of Shakespeare’s reception, theatre practitioners, audiences and scholars alike are at liberty to engage all the more energetically with this extraordinary work, though perhaps also with more circumspection, alert to its subtle resonances with divergent contexts. In that way we might continue to find new meanings and new pleasures in the interpretations offered by countless twenty-first century *Hamlets* across the globe, whether recognisable or not.

42. See Martin Orkin, *Local Shakespeares: Proximity and power* (London: Routledge, 2005), 19-22.

43. Nadine Gordimer referred to Shakespeare in this way during a public conversation with Imraan Coovadia held at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town in August 2011 in celebration of the publication of her collection of essays, *Telling Times: Writing and living, 1950-2008*.

44. Bernice Kliman cites a 2009 production of *Hamlet* as an example of the way “individual productions can and do make surprising and sometimes enlightening choices that bring the text to life in unexpected ways” (“What we hear; what we see: Theatre for a New Audience’s 2009 *Hamlet*” in *Shakespeare Survey* 64 (2001): 290). See also Kliman’s *Hamlet: Film, television, and audio performance* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988).

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