Freud's Footprints in Films of Hamlet

In 1910 Ernest Jones published an article, "Hamlet and Oedipus," which was to have a significant influence on the performance of Shakespeare's play. Jones said that an Oedipus complex dwells at the heart of Hamlet's mystery. This idea labors under a heavy load of theoretical and practical difficulties, but in films of Hamlet it seems to have become gospel. The idea is at the root of performances of the "closet" scene in each of the four readily available English-language films: Laurence Olivier's 1948 version, the 1969 production directed by Tony Richardson and starring Nicol Williamson, the 1980 BBC version with Derek Jacobi as Hamlet, and the 1990 production, directed by Franco Zeffirelli and starring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close.

Not only have these actors and directors all shown their belief in the Oedipal nature of Hamlet's story, but the idea seems to have become fixed in the popular understanding of the play. For instance, in its 1990 Christmas Eve issue, Maclean's magazine offered its readers a survey of films for holiday viewing, including the new Hamlet. The review, generally favorable, offered the observation that although Glenn Close "looks too young to be Gibson's mother, that serves to heighten the hint of incest" (Johnson 50). This casual comment indicates how deeply the "hint of incest," or the "Oedipus complex," has been inscribed upon the popular understanding of the play and the character.

This unquestioning acceptance of the same idea also appears in the recent scholarly commentary on the film productions of Hamlet. In an article examining Olivier's film version and the 1980 BBC television production, June Schlueter and James Lusardi note that it is the "Oedipal premise that provides a coherent sequence of stage images" (166), but they do not presume to comment on the persuasiveness or emotional effect of that sequence. More recently, Murray Biggs, in a survey of the treatment of the "closet" scene in four film versions, decries Zeffirelli's translation of "the Oedipal theme into a full-blown, vulgarized, traditional screen romance between coevals" (61). Thus Biggs, who certainly knows better, writes as though the "Oedipal theme" were an explicit fact of the text, rather than an interpretation.

How did this situation develop? And what should we think of it?

Jones's idea about the play came from Freud, and—in an oddly circular way—Freud's concept about the Oedipus complex may have come from the play. Or at least this is how Norman Holland tells the story:

It is not so much that Freud brought the Oedipus complex to Hamlet as that Hamlet brought the Oedipus complex to Freud. In the very letter (dated 15 October 1897) in which Freud first said, "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," he immediately went on to apply the concept to Oedipus Rex and Hamlet. It is almost as though the two plays guided him in his self-analysis. (59)
Freud’s key assertion is that Hamlet delays the killing of the King because the King is Hamlet’s unconscious self. That is, Claudius has done the two things that the repressed child inside Hamlet desires: killed the Father and married the Mother. Hamlet cannot bring himself to kill Claudius because Hamlet’s unconscious sees Claudius as Hamlet’s own self. This notion was developed into Jones’s article, and the article eventually became a book which Jones revised several times. More importantly for our story, producer Tyrone Guthrie found Jones’s idea interesting, and he passed it on to Laurence Olivier. At that time, 1936, Olivier was a rising young star of London’s fashionable West End theater district. Guthrie had persuaded him to turn aside—at least for a season—from his increasingly lucrative career, both stage and film, in order to dedicate himself to Shakespeare at the Old Vic.

The Old Vic was run by Miss Lilian Baylis, who was a kind of nun of the theater, dedicated to the classics and firmly opposed to liquor, licentiousness, and a living wage for actors. What she offered to an actor, other than an extremely slender salary, was the opportunity to make the sort of reputation that could be obtained nowhere else. According to John Cottrell, biographer of Olivier, Miss Baylis’s Old Vic attracted two sorts of actors:

> There were the ambitious young professionals with nothing to lose and all to gain in experience: innumerable names of the future such as Alec Guinness, James Mason, . . . Anthony Quayle, [and] . . . Michael Redgrave. The second group comprised actors and actresses firmly established as skilled and dedicated classical players—old stalwarts in supporting roles and a handful of towering talents such as Gielgud, Edith Evans and Sybil Thorndike. Olivier belonged to neither group. (117-18)

Olivier, though not an established star, had a reputation to lose if he should flop at the Old Vic, where he risked unfavorable comparisons to such legends as Gielgud. Olivier understood this very well, and so did Guthrie, who had his reputation as a producer at stake. Both men were convinced that something new was required. It would be no good for Olivier to simply echo the beautiful voice and delivery of Gielgud.

So it came about that 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.

Olivier was much taken with Jones’s essay, perhaps because it provided an avenue by which he could see his way clear to play the part to his strengths and away from what he thought of as his weaknesses. He was athletic and fond of acrobatics and swordplay, and said at the time of the making of the film that “my style of acting is more suited to stronger character roles, such as Hotspur and Henry V, rather than to the lyrical, poetical role of Hamlet” (Cross 15). Michael Redgrave, who played Laertes to his Hamlet, thought Olivier unsuited to the part. He said of his friend, “The very boldness of Larry’s personality, his natural drive and his pragmatism make him unsuitable to play an introspective, wavering character like Hamlet” (Cottrell 122).

But Jones, the eminent psychiatrist, showed Olivier an exit from his difficulty, because Jones asserts that Hamlet is not naturally wavering. According to Jones, the killing of the King is the only action which he does not carry through swiftly and resolutely, and he is held back from that action not by introspection, but by the invisible force of his unconscious. Olivier took Jones’s views to heart, and the result on stage was a performance which featured Olivier’s athleticism. Alec Guinness, who was his understudy, resented the “gymnastic leaps and falls” (Cottrell 122) that were required, and even Tyrone Guthrie had doubts about Olivier’s Hamlet. But it was a huge success, one which propelled Olivier’s reputation to new heights.

There was, however, one thing missing. No one, not the general audience, nor the most astute critics, had any suspicion that this hyperactive Hamlet was troubled with an Oedipus complex.

Eleven years later, when Olivier came to make the 1948 film version of *Hamlet*, his Freudean understanding of the play was made visible, even though it contradicted another of his ideas. The voice-over at the beginning of the film tells us that this is the story of “a
man who could not make up his mind," but the camera tells a different story. The first scene ends with Bernardo speaking a famous line transposed from a later scene, "Something is rotten in state of Denmark" (1.4.90). In Shakespeare's text this line is spoken by Marcellus and is answered by Horatio's "Heaven will direct it." However, in Olivier's film, the line becomes a kind of question, which the camera obligingly answers. Down and around the stairs, and more stairs, the camera looks for the source of rottenness. Finally it comes upon a clue or two. There is an empty banquet hall, and an empty chair; the camera sweeps along, finds a door, then backs away, turns and finds another passage, heads toward still another doorway, and then finally, entering the innermost recesses of the castle, it comes upon the Queen's bed. At this point the music announces a portentous "Ah-Ha!" As the camera lingers upon the bed, we notice that its canopy is royal and, if we are in a Freudian frame of mind, extremely suggestive. Also, despite the fact that the place is referred to as a "closet," the bed is huge.2

A little later, in the second scene of the play, we see Hamlet and his mother together, and a strange couple they make, too! During the filming Olivier turned forty, thirteen years older than Eileen Herli, who played the Queen. And although Herli is a bit stout, that doesn't really make her look old enough to be his mother; as a matter of fact, it's quite obvious that the age relationship is backward. Toward the end of the scene Hamlet's mother gives him such a prolonged and passionate kiss that the king is embarrassed for her, although Hamlet himself seems entirely unmoved.

Olivier then uses the closet scene to bring together Hamlet, his mother's kisses, and that huge bed, thus forming a partnership that would endure through all later English-speaking films of the play. As the years march on, each actor and actress brings something different to the closet scene, but there is always a suggestive embrace between mother and son, and the scene has become ever more active and ever more horizontal.

In Olivier's version of the closet scene, it is only a few seconds into the scene when the bed comes into play. As Hamlet is saying "sit you down" (3.4.18), he throws his mother onto the bed, and there she stays—either on the bed or briefly standing at its foot—for the remainder of the scene.

As for the embrace, Olivier not only shows it, but leads up to it. He presents the final portion of the scene, after the exit of the ghost, as a process of gradual reconciliation between Hamlet and his mother. As Hamlet is saying "do not spread the compost on the weeds/To make them ranker" (3.4.150-51), Gertrude is sitting on the bed, turned away from him, and he approaches her from behind and places his hand on her shoulders. From that point on, they get closer and closer. As he is urging her to live "the purer with the other half" (3.4.158), he gives her a filial smack (which we can hear) above her right eyebrow. Then, when he bids her "Once more good night" (3.4.170), he kneels before her; she takes his head in her hands and kisses him maternally upon the cheek, and then, for a bit longer, on the lips. He says, "I must be cruel only to be kind" (3.4.178), and pensively drops his head into her lap. Hamlet then remembers Polonius and sits up, but his hand is still on his mother's shoulder, and after he says, "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room" (3.4.212), we are given the climax of the reconciliation between mother and son.

At this point Olivier abandons Shakespeare's words entirely. Hamlet and Gertrude look into each other's eyes for a moment; in the next moment, Hamlet, looking up and down, shows a flicker of a smile; and then, for a much longer moment, they lock into a lover's embrace and kiss. Hamlet then rises to take care of Polonius, and the camera fades out on the Queen, an arm outstretched to her departing son.

A little more than twenty years later, in the 1969 film of *Hamlet*, directed by Tony Richardson and starring Nicol Williamson, the Oedipal overtones are somewhat muted, but the bed and the climactic embrace are retained, with an important addition.

In the closet scene, before the entrance of the ghost, the Queen spends most of her time in a chair, and Hamlet approaches her only to compare the two miniature portraits of his father and his uncle. After the interlude with the ghost, Hamlet, on the verge of tears as he speaks of "rank corruption" (3.4.148), falls full length on the bed, his head on a pillow. As she
speaks the lines “O Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.156), Gertrude sits on the bed, beside him, her tears flowing freely. By the time Hamlet is saying “I’ll blessing beg of you” (3.4.172), he is also in tears, and his mother lies beside him while they wrap their arms about one another and cry together. In this version, mother and son never kiss one another, as in Olivier’s version, but on the other hand, Olivier didn’t have his Hamlet lie down with his mother.

In two later films, the Oedipal suggestions return in full force, with all of the elements presented in both the Olivier and Richardson versions, and with the addition of simulated sex.

In the closet scene of the 1980 BBC Hamlet, starring Derek Jacobi, the suggestions of mother-son sex come earlier and stronger than in two previous films. When Hamlet compares the pictures of the two brothers, and comes to the point at which he demands “what judgment/Would step from this to this” (3.4.69-70), Gertrude tries to flee him. Hamlet pursues her, seizes her hand, drags her to the bed, flings her upon it, and then gets on both the bed and her. As he says, “Proclaim no shame/When compulsive ardure give the charge” (3.4.85-86), he is astride her, jostling her. He soon dismounts, to lie beside her, but when he is raging on about the “rank sweat of an eneamed bed” (3.4.92), he uses his arm to jostle her again, in a way that plainly illustrates the activity he has in mind.

A second later, the camera gets into the act. As Hamlet delivers the lines about “a Vice of kings” (3.4.98), he stands up and pulls her off the bed, whereupon the camera shows us the view from the floor at the foot of the bed, where we can see that her dress is hiked up, revealing quite a lot of her white stockings.

Then the ghost enters, and things quiet down, but the later embrace of reconciliation also carries its Oedipal freight. After the ghost exits, mother and son are both on the floor at the foot of the bed. He takes one of her hands in both of his as he asks her to “Confess . . . to heaven” (3.4.149), and when he pleads with her to “throw away the worser part” (3.4.157) of her heart, she disengages her hand and reaches for his cheek. Then comes the embrace, which is shown from the back of Hamlet, so that we can see her lightly kiss his neck. It is in this embrace that Hamlet says “go not to my uncle’s bed” (3.4.159), which surprises Gertrude and ends the tender—and suggestive—moment.

The opening credits of the 1990 Franco Zeffirelli film of Hamlet modestly, and accurately, state that it is “based on the play by William Shakespeare.” The credits also give equal billing to Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, which is appropriate, because Zeffirelli does a great deal to enhance Gertrude’s importance. His cut-and-paste treatment of Shakespeare’s script and his lavish use of the scenic resources of three different castles gives him ample opportunity to present his idea of Gertrude even when she has no lines. The opening scene, at the tomb of old Hamlet, focuses on her grief and her awakening (or perhaps guilty) interest in Claudius. Zeffirelli also has her run a great deal. She runs to greet Claudius; she rushes out of the room after Hamlet has agreed to stay in Denmark; she runs down a long flight of stairs to say farewell to Hamlet when he is about to leave for England. All this running, which may be borrowed from Zeffirelli’s own Romeo and Juliet, shows Gertrude as girlish, impulsive, and extremely attractive.

Gertrude also runs in the closet scene, but here she runs into a trap. As in the BBC production, this Hamlet uses the first part of the scene, before the entrance of the ghost, to focus on the Oedipal implications of the relationship between mother and son. After he has killed Polonius, Hamlet drops his sword and advances toward Gertrude, but she turns and runs. The bed, as in all the previous films of Hamlet, is very large, and by the time she has rounded the head of it, Hamlet intercepts her, so that she has to retreat up onto the bed in order to avoid him. As she asks, “Ay me, what act./That roars so loud and thunders in the index” (3.4.51-52)?, she is crouched against the headboard; Hamlet, following her, also gets onto the bed and kneels before her.

Then follows the traditional business in which Hamlet compares portrait medallions. When he says, “This was your husband” (3.4.63), Gertrude again tries to escape, but her son, pulling violently on the chain by which her medallion hangs, forces her face down onto
the bed and lies down beside her. During the remainder of the speech he begins to weep, rises, and retreats to the background of the picture, but when Gertrude finishes her reply about the "spots" in her soul (3.4.90), he turns her over onto her back and leaps astride. This stage business is apparently borrowed from the BBC production, but there we saw Hamlet from the side in a medium shot, and Gertrude was barely visible or audible, while in this film we see Gertrude in close-up. Gibson times his lines to four violent thrusts: "STEW’d in CORruption, HONEYing and MAKing love" (3.4.93). At each thrust Gertrude cries out and the upper part of her body rises off the bed. Hamlet then dissolves in tears and lays his head on her shoulder. Finally, as he is saying, "A king of shreds and patches" (3.4.101), she stops him with a passionate, open-mouthed kiss.

The whole sequence vividly brings together, in a most explicit manner, all of the elements that had been established in the earlier films, but to what end? And to what end all of the Oedipal baggage carried by all four films?33

The films all present an idea about Hamlet's character, Freud's and Jones's idea. However, that idea has been effectively challenged at its very foundation, which is that it is meaningful as literary analysis to "pretend that Hamlet was a living person... and inquire what measure of man such a person must have been to feel and act in certain situations in the way Shakespeare tells us he did" (Jones 19). This, according to Meredith Skura, in her well-received The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process, is not a valid procedure; she says that the reality of Shakespeare's characters, "even though it depends on their being irrational as well as rational beings, does not include the kind of unconscious experience on which an analysis is based" (38).

Even if it is true that a man with an Oedipus complex might very well do and say the things that the Shakespearean text clearly indicates Hamlet does and says, that does not make the Oedipus complex part of the subject matter of the drama. A man with battle-induced Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (and Ophelia says that Hamlet is a soldier) might also speak and act as Hamlet does, but that doesn't mean that Hamlet suffers from that particular problem. The Shakespearean text shows a man struggling with despair and anger; the subject matter is the experience and the moral significance of that struggle, not its medical diagnosis. To assign a neurotic Oedipus complex to Hamlet is akin to offering a medical diagnosis of Ivan Ilych's deadly bruise; the diagnosis can never be confirmed because a fictional character is unavailable for autopsy. And most importantly, to offer a medical diagnosis of that bruise is certain evidence that the significance of the story has been entirely missed. Ivan Ilych engages in the struggle with the sickness unto death which is beyond the curative power of any medicine. Similarly, Hamlet is engaged in a struggle with what is unknowable: with death, with the transience of love, and with the elusiveness of the self. 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.

Still, despite all of these objections, might it be possible that Jones's analysis might aid an actor in the development of Hamlet's character? Norman Holland, probably the most respected American psychoanalytic critic, seems to allow for this possibility. He says that "the psychoanalytic critic of Shakespearean character applies psychoanalytic words in a context where they do not belong" (306), but then he adds, "I can think of only one case where the pretense [that a literary character is a living person] has some claim to be appropriate, namely, for the actor or director who is trying to make the play 'come alive'" (307). Mr. Holland goes on to argue against his own exception, but what if we allow the exception, as a matter of the necessary artistic freedom of modern actors and directors? From that point of view, would the "Oedipal" stage business of the films be valid? Or, to put the question another way, if Hamlet can be presented to the modern understanding as a person with a neurotic Oedipus complex, would that person act as Hamlet acts in the films? As I understand psychoanalysis, the answer would almost certainly be "no."

Consider, for example, a patient whom Freud called a "case of Lady Macbeth":

This was a woman with a dirt phobia who kept washing her hands and would not touch doorknobs except with her elbows. She had committed adultery, Freud discovered, and "the
washing was symbolic, designed to replace by physical purity the moral purity which she regretted having lost.” (Skura 43-44)

Meredith Skura, in the course of making her argument about the difference between fictional characters and real persons, points out that in the case of this real person, the underlying problem is concealed from the patient by the dirt phobia which symbolizes it. If the lady had recognized her problem and avoided her lover instead of doorknobs, Freud would have had no work to do. The general point is that unconscious problems are unconscious. If Hamlet “really” did have a neurotic Oedipus complex, he might act it out in a variety of symbolic ways, but he almost certainly would not act it out in simulated sex with his mother, for then the problem would no longer be unconscious, but terrifyingly conscious.

Oedipus, when it was foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother, ran away from the possibility. Hamlet, and every other normal neurotic, would also run. In short, if Hamlet is to be presented as a person with an Oedipus complex, he probably should be made to stay far away from his mother, rather than perform the various suggestive actions that appear in the films.

That, however, seems unlikely to happen. Many years hence these films of Hamlet may be the subject of the same sort of sardonic commentary that we bestow on eighteenth-century productions of Shakespeare “improved,” but 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.

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Notes

1 The biographical information about Olivier in the next two paragraphs is taken from John Cottrell’s biography.

2 Although there’s no accounting for what people will keep in their rooms, it’s doubtful that closets of Shakespeare’s time would have had a bed at all, much less a large one. In the Oxford English Dictionary the sixteenth and seventeenth century references for “closet” all indicate that it was a private study or dressing room, which are the senses in which Shakespeare uses the word in his other plays.

3 To these questions, I don’t feel fully qualified to speak. If any one of these films had moved me to pity and fear. I might be able to offer an opinion on whether or not the elements I have been discussing contributed or detracted from that effect. However, none of the four films moved me at all, although I consider them worthy of academic interest.

Works Cited


