One of Freud’s most well-known claims is that ‘the conflict in Hamlet is so effectively concealed that it was left to me to unearth it’. The conflict that he names is what we have come to know as the Oedipus Complex. So proud was Freud of this discovery that he repeated it several times, across many years and in various contexts. The first appearance of this was in The Interpretation of Dreams in 1900, and it also appears again in ‘The Moses of Michelangelo’ (1914), where Freud notes:

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! . . . 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?

Looking beyond language and thought, Freud seeks to explain the aesthetic effect of the play. There is little doubt in his mind that it is the literature of psychoanalysis that will offer him the chance to solve his riddle. But it was possible for others to reach similar conclusions, and earlier, by alternate routes. For the moment, I want to stay with Freud. In The Interpretation of Dreams, the commentary on Hamlet is initially confined to a footnote to the discussion of the Oedipus Complex, but by the 1934 edition it has been

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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 ‘sicklied 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. . . . 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.  

*Hamlet* has its roots in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*, and it is left to Freud to ‘unearth’ the connection between the two plays. Freud digs, like a mole, finding in Shakespeare’s dream-play fertile ground for a dream of his own. The parallel with Oedipus is not simply a matter of explaining the fascination exerted by two dramatic texts. The common view of Freud’s early work as being concerned primarily with sexuality has led to an equally common emphasis on his over-reading of parricide and incest in the formation of the Oedipus Complex.

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