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Oedipus Complex

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* consists of multiple characters whose motivations are utterly unexplainable and altogether bewildering. Hamlet's actions, being the main character, are always under the scholarly lens for close examination. Hamlet is often criticized for his inability to act on any of his conscious desires. Freud explains that this is because of the "Oedipus Complex." *Oedipus* is a play in which the main character fulfills his prophecy by murdering his father and marrying his mother. Freud employs the play to support his claim that, "It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father." (pg. 921). But in *Hamlet*, Hamlet's subconscious wish to murder his father and wed his mother is complicated by Claudius manifesting these desires before he can. Freud's claims that Hamlet is conflicted by Claudius's presence are well developed and plausible but seem abhorrently flawed. Hamlet would never otherwise have an opportunity to seize his mother's sexuality if not for Claudius defiling the throne by murdering his brother (Hamlet's father). Hamlet now has a justifiable reason to murder the father figure and take his mother. Hamlet may be extremely conflicted and unable to execute actions, but the Oedipus complex is not a proper explanation for his indecisiveness, rather motivation for his actions.

The play *Oedipus* is a story in which a prophecy of a child killing his father and marrying his mother rocks the foundation of a kingdom. The parents of this child send him

away to avoid this dreadful fate. The child grows up to unknowingly defeat his father in battle on the road, and marry a queen, his mother. Most read the play *Oedipus* as a tale of destiny that irrevocably disputes a person's ability to stray from a predestined outcome. After presenting this argument though, Freud belittles it by offering the play as a far more complex critique on the psychoanalysis of youth. He asserts that the play exemplifies an innate desire in each person to hate and wish to murder their father, while also having sexual desire for their mother.

Applying this story to *Hamlet*, Freud argues that Hamlet is encountering the same facet of emotions. He wishes to murder his father and marry his mother. But these desires are complicated by Claudius fulfilling them before Hamlet could. Now Hamlet is conflicted in that he desires to fulfill his father's role, but Claudius is the one residing in the role, a figure Hamlet has no prior animosity for. According to Freud, Claudius is "the man who shows him [Hamlet] the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized" (pg. 923).

Because Claudius is the manifestation of Hamlet's desires, Hamlet witnesses what he could be and cannot therefore murder Claudius because he would be no better than the sinner he is condemning.

Hamlet was distracted at college when the play begins, but the murder of his father provides a catalyst for his desires. Through Claudius' unwarranted murder of Hamlet Sr., Hamlet is provided an opportunity to capture his mother's sexuality. Hamlet can justify obtaining the throne and Gertrude by claiming that he was avenging his father. Although Freud says that Claudius reigning in his father's position paralyzes Hamlet, logically it seems that it should in fact launch Hamlet into action. The only thing blocking Hamlet's

road to the throne is public opinion. For Hamlet's claim to the throne to have any merit he would need indisputable proof that Claudius was guilty.

In the play that Hamlet orchestrates to inspect Claudius' potentially guilty reaction, he reenacts Claudius' murder of Hamlet Sr. but for one crucial detail. In the play it is the nephew of the king that murders for the throne. This modification, whether subconscious or not, is a clear threat to Claudius revealing Hamlet's desire to achieve the kingdom and Gertrude's hand. Freud would say that this is Hamlet further delaying any action. Hamlet is stalling in Freud's opinion because he is torn between fulfilling his father's role and condemning himself. But I think this aspect of the play is not so complex. This scene is just as Hamlet claims, a search for evidence. It should also be noted this is not a search of evidence for himself but evidence to prove to the public that the murder of Claudius would be justified.

The next peculiar moment to examine comes when Hamlet stumbles upon an unsuspecting Claudius entranced in prayer. This seems to be the perfect opportunity to strike down Claudius and claim Gertrude as his lover, but Hamlet does not do this. He claims that he avoids killing Claudius while he is praying because it would send him to heaven rather than hell, rendering the plan futile. This coordinates itself with the Oedipus complex but not how Freud utilizes it. The Oedipus complex recognizes not just murderous tendencies, but hateful ones. Therefore Hamlet would not just want to kill Claudius but ensure that he is condemned to hell for his actions. Freud says that Hamlet is not acting because he does not wish to mirror Claudius' despicable actions, but here Hamlet claims he is not acting because the murder of this fashion would not be detrimental enough.

Hamlet's complex and subtle desires for his mother also resonate through his relationship with Ophelia. Hamlet inconsistently forces distance between Ophelia and himself, only to then retreat these emotions and profess his love for her. These complicated interactions can directly correlate with Hamlet's conflicting emotions towards his mother and subconscious sexual desires for her. Hamlet most likely understands that Ophelia is a woman better suited for him, but he seems flustered and confused by these sexual nuances between Gertrude and himself.

Freud discusses Claudius as a manifestation of Hamlet's desires, but Hamlet has another mirroring figure in the play. Laertes, like Hamlet, loses his father to a murderer (Hamlet). Laertes though, as far as we know, has no mother to direct his sexual frustration towards and whole-heartedly seeks revenge and nothing more. Freud would implement this idea towards his theory that because Laertes has no sexual frustration towards a mother figure, he is Hamlet without the complication, and can therefore immediately act. I would respond to Freud by saying that Laertes while lacking a mother, lack another complication that Hamlet has, that being public opinion. Everyone knows that Hamlet was the one to murder Polonius, and therefore Laertes seeking revenge on Hamlet would be deemed acceptable in the public eye. Hamlet however has no reliable proof that Claudius is the murderer of his father, and therefore cannot justifiably seek revenge. The delay in action in Hamlet is thus not caused from complex feelings towards Claudius, but a lack of proof.