



SHAKESPEARE AND PSYCHOLOGY: A STUDY OF THE SOLILOQUIES OF SELECT MAJOR TRAGEDIES

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Article Received:13/09/2020

Article Accepted: 18/10/2020

Published online:25/10/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.5](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.5)

Abstract

Human psychology is a major preoccupation of the tragedies of Shakespeare. Shakespeare has studied and engaged with many diverse possibilities of the ways of functioning of the human mind. Bringing out the functioning of human mind in philosophical discourse and diagnosing different personality types is different from and more challenging to bring the same alive on stage. Shakespeare has used soliloquies for this purpose. The working of the mind of a character is brought before the audience through soliloquies. However, the soliloquies do not only reveal the conscious mind of the characters but also what is in the unconscious. The reader or audience can probably approach the mind of the characters through the gaps and silences in the soliloquies. The present paper is an attempt to read some such gaps and silences in some major soliloquies.

Keywords: Psychology; tragedies of Shakespeare; soliloquies; unconscious

Human psychology is a major preoccupation of the tragedies of Shakespeare. Psychological interpretations of Shakespeare's plays have become so popular that no student of literature these days would attempt to read Shakespeare's major tragedy *Hamlet* without reading the psychological interpretations of the play by Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones, Jacques Lacan and others. It is a fact that Shakespeare's plays played a very crucial role in Freud's mapping of human mind and his formulation of psychoanalysis. Images, motifs, plots and themes of Shakespeare's plays form the raw materials from which Freud formulated his theory of psychoanalysis. Talking about the relationship between Shakespeare and Freud, Harold Bloom in an interview says that "Freud has to be seen as a prose version of Shakespeare, the Freudian map of the mind being in fact Shakespearean. . . . What we think of as Freudian psychology is really a Shakespearean

invention . . . Freud is merely codifying it" (Bloom, 1991). Freud himself also said in 1928 that "The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied."

Joshua Rothman has written in *The New Yorker* that "we tell the story wrong when we say that Freud used the idea of the Oedipus complex to understand *Hamlet*". Rothman suggests that "it was the other way around: *Hamlet* helped Freud understand, and perhaps even invent, psychoanalysis". He concludes, "The Oedipus complex is a misnomer. It should be called the 'Hamlet complex'." (qtd. in *Shakespeare and Psychoanalysis*)

In all his major tragedies, such as, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, Shakespeare apparently seems to suggest the motivations of the characters behind the choices they make. Theatrical

presentations of the plays must have appealed to the moral sense of the contemporary audience. However, Shakespeare became Shakespeare not because his plays appealed to his contemporary audience. Shakespeare became Shakespeare because his use of language and poetry defy any definite interpretation of the motivations of his characters. For centuries, they have baffled discerning readers who have tried to understand the motives behind the actions of his characters and come up with interpretations that have satisfied them. Shakespeare has left many gaps and silences in the speeches of his characters which lend his plays to multiple interpretations. One device that Shakespeare has used abundantly to explore the psyche of his characters is soliloquy. Through soliloquies Shakespeare makes his characters speak out what is going on in their conscious mind at given junctures of the plays. However, it is up to the readers to interpret the hidden motivations what in Freud's term is called the motives of the 'unconscious mind'.

Investigations of the hidden motives of Hamlet and his inability to do what he resolves to do in his conscious mind led Freud to construct his theory of psychoanalysis. According to Freud, Hamlet suffers from Oedipus complex, that is, a secret desire for his mother. He is not able to take revenge on his uncle Claudius by killing him because Hamlet finds that he himself is guilty of incestuous desire for his mother and no better than Claudius. Similar motives of Hamlet have been established by Ernest Jones and Jacques Lacan also.

However, psychoanalytic reading is not the only psychological reading of the play. Focusing on the first soliloquy of Hamlet, David P. Gontar in his essay '*Hamlet Made Simple*' rejects the psychoanalytic reading of the play. He contends that Claudius was not Hamlet's uncle but his biological father. Hamlet's hesitation to kill Claudius results from his unwillingness to kill his real father. The very first soliloquy of Hamlet hints at his status in the court. If he was the legitimate biological son of the murdered king, he should be the heir to the throne of Denmark. This does not happen. Instead of Hamlet, Claudius succeeds the throne from his brother. The soliloquy leaves this gap. It does not

explain why Hamlet does not succeed the throne. Hamlet's being the illegitimate biological son of Claudius explains why Hamlet is not in line for succession. This explains many things including Hamlet's contemplation of suicide in the very first line of the first soliloquy much before his meeting with the ghost of the slain King. Hamlet seems to contemplate suicide because of the futility of his life as an illegitimate child in the court. This also explains the cause of the murder of Senior Hamlet by Claudius and the hurried marriage between Gertrude and Claudius. Claudius and Gertrude must have had a longstanding incestuous affair. They could have married only after killing Senior Hamlet. Hamlet hates his mother and also his biological father Claudius for their lust for each other and giving birth to him as an illegitimate child.

Freud's another favourite Shakespearean play, next to *Hamlet*, is *Macbeth*. Both these plays figure in his list of "the ten most magnificent works of world literature" (Holland, 1960: 165). Freud had a long deliberation to understand the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. First, he dealt with them in a paper, 'Those Wrecked by Success' (1916) while dealing with different clinical cases, such as, hysteria, paranoia and narcissism. In *Lady Macbeth*, Freud finds a case of an individual 'who collapse on reaching success'. Freud also tried to explain Lady Macbeth's psychic breakdown from her childlessness. Childlessness of Lady Macbeth is looked at as a poetic justice keeping in mind Macbeth's murder of a father in Banquo, his murder of children of Macduff and also 'unsexing' soliloquy of Lady Macbeth. Freud, however, rejects these two foregone arguments and concludes his paper with a very different argument. Referring to a paper by Ludwig Jekels, he suggests that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are actually one single personality split into two. Freud asserts that Shakespeare would "often split a character into two personages" (1916: 323). Whatever fear Macbeth harbours in his mind after the first murder is manifested in Lady Macbeth. Freud summarizes the play by showing how its rapidly progressing action wavers between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth:

It is he who has the hallucination of the dagger before the crime; but it is she

who afterwards falls ill of a mental disorder. It is he who after the murder hears the cry in the house: "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep . . ." and so "Macbeth shall sleep no more"; but we never hear that *he* slept no more, while the Queen, as we see, rises from her bed and, talking in her sleep, betrays her guilt. . . . Thus what he feared in his pangs of conscience is fulfilled in her . . .

Thus, *she* becomes all remorse while *he* is all defiance. "Together they exhaust the possibilities of reaction to the crime, like two disunited parts of a single psychical individuality" (1916: 324).

One interesting fact is that Freud has written on *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and also *The Merchant of Venice*, however, he has not written on *Othello* although it is a major tragedy of Shakespeare. Now, the insight from Freud's final analysis of *Macbeth* and his argument that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are but 'one personality split into two' can be useful in understanding the character of Othello. Othello has been traditionally studied as a victim of evil insinuation of Iago. Othello's character has been evaluated in the positive light as a good natured but gullible person. However, most psychoanalytical studies hold Othello responsible for the murder of Desdemona and eventually his own downfall (Paris, 1991: 281). Othello has been established as a narcissistic person. Bernard J. Paris argues that Othello mythologizes himself and his exploits. Desdemona confirms his idealized image and feeds his pride in himself. He loves Desdemona for this (1991: 81-83). David Enoch, a psychiatrist observes that Iago merely fanned the flame of jealousy "which was already embedded in Othello's personality" (1991: 38).

From this, it can be argued, in line with Freud's argument on *Macbeth*, that Iago and Othello are not two persons but Othello, split into two. The dialogues between Iago and Othello are but Othello's own deliberations with himself. Othello has also been studied as a case of 'psychopathology of sexual jealousy' by John Todd and K. Dewhurst in a paper entitled "The Othello

Syndrome: A Study in the Psychopathology of Sexual Jealousy." This psychopathological sexual jealousy is probably the result of his inferiority complex for being black, advanced in age and lacking in the art of conversation with ladies when compared to Cassio. This is confirmed by one of Othello's soliloquies:

"Haply for I am black, And have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have; or for I am declined into the vale of years—

Othello Act III, Scene III

To conclude it can be said that, Shakespeare is Shakespeare because his exploration of human psychology of his characters in its endless possibilities is so remarkable that they do not lend themselves to any definite interpretation of their motivations.

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