

Interpreting Hamlet and Gertrude – Psychoanalytic Views

Hester Glass draws on production decisions for Hamlet over time, alongside psychoanalytic readings of the play, to examine the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude and ask how persuasive these readings are.

Hamlet's mother Gertrude has relatively few lines in Hamlet but she is central to the action of the play, and her presence on stage is always significant. Her relationships with the male protagonists – Hamlet, his dead father, and Claudius – help drive the plot, and provide a motive for murder and revenge. The director, and the actor playing Gertrude, have an intriguing task: how to interpret the character of a woman who says little, and whose words, when she does speak, are usually brief, and pointed. So, what are Gertrude's motives and why did she agree to an 'o'er hasty marriage' with her dead husband's brother? And how should the actor playing Hamlet interpret his character's rage and despair in the face of this marriage – a fury which erupts with a vicious attack on his mother in the infamous 'closet scene' in Act 3, Scene 4? The director and actors' interpretation of this complex mother/son relationship is at the heart of any performance of Hamlet.

Staging and Productions – 'The Closet Scene'

A student of literature studying Hamlet for the first time can explore an almost inexhaustible variety of theatre and film

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productions, and discuss the distinctive methods and effects achieved by different directors and actors. You may be drawn to David Tennant's Hamlet, with Penny Downie as Gertrude (2009), Paapa Esseidu with Tanya Moodie (2016), Andrew Scott with Juliet Stevenson (2017), or a much earlier film production, with Laurence Olivier and Eileen Herlie (1948). Each production offers a new perspective and generates different meanings, ideas, tone, and style. As well as casting, the staging and production choices have a crucial impact; compare, for example, Kenneth Branagh's film version (1996) and its bright, menacing halls of mirrors with the dark and oppressive BBC theatre production starring Derek Jacobi and Claire Bloom (1980).

However, one staging decision that nearly all productions have in common is that the 'closet scene' (Act 3, Scene 4) takes place in a bedroom, and this becomes central to the interpretation of the mother/son dynamic in the play. As long ago as 1950 the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan wondered,

why there should be a bed centre stage in every production of this scene. It is never mentioned and never slept in.

Tynan is clearly being ironic here – the bed does not signify a place for rest and sleep. And you may ask, is he correct in saying the bed 'is never mentioned'? Towards the end of the scene Hamlet directs his mother to resist her husband's sexual advances and not,

Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed

so, a 'bed' is mentioned, however there is nothing to suggest that this bed is in the room Hamlet and his mother occupy in the scene. In Act 3, Scene 2 Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that his mother,

desires to speak with you in her closet ere you go to bed

and in Act 3, Scene 3 Polonius confirms to the King that 'he's going to his mother's closet.' (line 27). A 'closet' in Shakespeare's time was a person's private room, so undoubtedly this is an intimate space in which Hamlet meets with his mother, but it is not a bedroom. It is interesting therefore to explore why a bed is almost always placed centre stage.

Why Is There a Bed In The Closet?

In his influential 'What Happens in Hamlet', (1935) John Dover Wilson refers to the 'closet scene' as the 'bedroom scene' throughout his exploration of the play, and in 1934 John Gielgud explained, when discussing his stage production of Hamlet that,

The text seems to warrant a chair in this scene for the Queen to sit on, but I have always thought that there should be a bed as well. [...] A real bed may encourage the

audience to indulge in speculation as to the sleeping accommodations of the palace.

So, Gielgud included the bed when he staged Hamlet in New York and London, and from that time until today the bed has become a feature of most productions. In Laurence Olivier's film adaptation (1948) he goes much further than prompting the audience to

*speculate as to the sleeping accommodations
of the palace*

instead creating a highly sexually-charged scene between Hamlet and his mother. Eileen Herlie, aged only 29 at the time, plays Gertrude, while Olivier, her son in the play, is 40 years old. This imbalanced casting, and the physical intimacy and violence of the scene, are a conscious representation of Hamlet's aberrant sexual motives, in which his disgust with his mother is complicated by his own desires. As censorship and audience expectations have developed over the years, so too has the representation of this sexual aberration, culminating recently in Andrew Scott's Hamlet simulating sex with the actor playing Gertrude, as he says the lines,

*Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making
love
Over the nasty sty.*

Hamlet's language is rich with revulsion, and he certainly loathes the sexual intimacy between his mother and his uncle, particularly as he tells Gertrude that

*at your age
The hey day in the blood is tame*

but do Hamlet's words really suggest his own sexual aggression towards his mother?

The Influence of Freud

To answer this question, it is helpful to consider the influence of Freud's psychoanalytical theories, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and a seminal study of the play by Freud's colleague, Ernest Jones, 'The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery' (1910) which Jones later expanded and published in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949).

Freud's 'Oedipus Complex' is named after the Ancient Greek mythological character Oedipus, immortalised in Sophocles play *Oedipus Rex* (ca. 429 BCE), in which Oedipus is destined to unwittingly kill his father and marry his mother. About Oedipus, Freud writes,

His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the Oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. 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. Our dreams convince us that this is so.

Sigmund Freud: The Interpretation of Dreams

Freud claims that Hamlet 'has its roots in the same soil as Oedipus Rex', and that the differences between the two plays are revealing:

In Oedipus Rex the child's wishful fantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realised 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.

Sigmund Freud: The Interpretation of Dreams

Freud's reading of Hamlet's behaviour toward his mother, and Ophelia too, is understood in terms of 'neurosis', caused by his unconscious and unresolved desire for his mother. These ideas are developed in depth by Freud's colleague Ernest Jones. In 'The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery', Jones further explores a psychoanalytical reading of the play. (The full essay is available online, in the public domain.)

Ernest Jones' Reading

Jones argues that while Hamlet abhors Claudius for all his crimes, it is his 'incest' in marrying the Queen, rather than his murder of his brother, that awakens in Hamlet 'the intensest horror'. He believes that,

For some deep-seated reason Hamlet is plunged into anguish at the thought of his father being replaced in his mother's affection by someone else.

In Jones' view the Oedipal complex provides an explanation for Hamlet's anguish. He sees in the play evidence that Hamlet and his mother have had an extremely affectionate relationship, and that 'as is always the case' this close bond

contained elements of a more or less dimly defined erotic quality.

If Hamlet's maturation into adulthood had run its normal course, Jones argues, this

long repressed desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection

would not have troubled him. However, the trauma of his father's death and mother's second marriage stimulate 'unconscious activity' and

these ancient desires are ringing in his mind.

Hamlet's disturbed and tormented mental state is therefore caused by the energy required to again repress these desires, and this is evident in his behaviour towards Ophelia and his mother.

The Influence of Jones

Jones makes a convincing case for the cause of Hamlet's deteriorating mental state being his repressed desire for his mother, and his analysis remains hugely influential; even if modern directors and actors know nothing of Jones' text, its central thesis can be traced through the history of modern productions of the play, from Olivier's explosive psychosexual interpretation at the Old Vic theatre in 1937 onwards. What is more, there is a great deal in the language of the play to support this interpretation of Hamlet's motives, chiefly in his verbal attacks on both Ophelia and Gertrude. Psychoanalysis is a powerful tool to explain the behaviour of a young man who orders the woman he loves to,

Go thy ways to a nunnery

and his mother to

*go not to my uncle's bed
Assume a virtue if you have it not.*

However, it is important to remember that Shakespeare wrote his great tragedy Hamlet more than 300 years before

Freud's Interpretation of Dreams and Jones' Oedipus and Hamlet. There is no definitive answer to the question of Hamlet's behaviour towards his mother, and psychoanalysis gives us just one possible interpretation.