

Letty Mundt

30 March 2017

Literary Theory and Writing

Professor Scheler

The Sadistic Don't Discriminate: Hamlet's Feelings toward Ophelia through a Freudian Lens

For all the questions that go unanswered within the lines of *Hamlet*, the uncertainty of Hamlet's feelings and treatment toward Ophelia throughout the play remains perhaps one of the most puzzling. It is clear his behavior and expression towards Ophelia is a contradiction—he claims to love her in letters, then declares she never should have believed him, then mercilessly flirts with her, then ultimately ignores and mistreats her. This back-and-forth dance does not let up for longer than a few scenes at a time, and is never explained or justified properly, neither by Hamlet nor anyone around him. Why? If the methodological approach of psychoanalysis—specifically Freud's—is taken into account, an opportunity is given to make sense of Hamlet's feelings. It is Freud's work in "Mourning and Melancholia" that can assist in aligning Hamlet's cruelty toward Ophelia with a sadistic urge brought upon by the melancholia his father's death provoked—but yet, this method and Freud's description of sadism can still be evidence for both Hamlet loving and not loving Ophelia. Therefore, an analysis through Freud's lens not only offers an explanation for Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia; it also can explain the ambiguity of Hamlet's feelings for her—because such an analysis implies Hamlet in a melancholic state would treat Ophelia the same whether he loved her or not,

In the conversation surrounding the question of Hamlet's feelings and behavior, there are no doubt others who have wrestled with the text in an attempt to find an answer—but perhaps there is no answer to be found. Robert Bozanich in his article "The Eye of the Beholder: Hamlet

to Ophelia, II. ii. 109-24" finds his own brand of frustration in that "our difficulty as modern readers comes with the 'doubt'" (Bozanich 91) Hamlet instills in the audience and Ophelia by the way he describes his feelings, specifically in the letters he sends to Ophelia in the second act. Bozanich asks, "And what of the proposition that Hamlet loves Ophelia? Is it true or false?" (91), and spends his piece analyzing the possible double-meanings laced throughout Hamlet's supposed love confession. Bozanich ultimately arrives at the same conclusion he started with: that doubt and ambiguity are the nature of Hamlet's words, and perhaps, the nature of Hamlet's feelings. But yet, Bozanich and the scholarly community he discusses in his work remain unsatisfied with the fact that they cannot come to a conclusion about Hamlet's feelings, still wondering at the cause of this "ultimate mystery" (93). What this critical conversation might be missing is accounting for what the poet John Keats referred to as "a quality...which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties...without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 968). Perhaps Hamlet's ambiguity toward Ophelia is not a problem within the play, but an essential aspect of his character, something we are not supposed to "[reach] after fact and reason" for and instead be "capable of being in [the] uncertaint[y]" of.

Perhaps Freud's methodology can provide not a clarification of Hamlet's ambiguous language, but an answer to *why* his feelings are so ambiguous, and why his treatment of Ophelia is often exceedingly callous. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud discusses melancholia as a separate concept from normal mourning, when someone's grief over the loss of a person or object stems from a fixation on the self rather than a fixation on the lost object. Freud notes that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud 246). This often results from the melancholic personally and narcissistically

identifying with the lost object, seeing a similarity to the self inside of it. This identification and internal grief leads to a dangerous loss of self, or “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.” In order to protect itself from this continued self-loss, Freud suggests the ego takes its self-destructive energy and projects it onto another person or object, “abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering” (251). This sadism is not only caused by the melancholia itself, but by “situations of being slighted, neglected, or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence.” Therefore, melancholia can turn into a type of sadism that allows the mourner to hurt those they love, but also, melancholia can turn into a type of sadism that is merely lashing out to protect its own ego and “derive...satisfaction” from the hurt it causes, and it may not imply love at all, only that someone around them is easy to provoke and gain this satisfaction from. This sadistic tendency may simply “reinforce” an ambiguity a relationship already provides, or “import” feelings of love or hate that may or may not exist. This suggests the melancholic will lash out at both people they love, and people they don't, and it is impossible to see through their grieving defenses and pinpoint exactly how they feel about someone they are mistreating.

And so, if Hamlet can be identified as melancholic and sadistic in the way Freud describes, his conflicting actions and emotions might make more sense. If melancholia can be caused by the loss of someone or something alike to the mourner, then the immediate loss of Hamlet's father, the “Old Hamlet,” is a likely source of any melancholic and sadistic behavior Hamlet might exhibit. He follows the explanation of melancholia to a tee—first, in that his “lost object,” his father, is in fact alike to him, resulting in the narcissistic identification Freud describes. Not only do they share a name, they both share the same thirst for vengeance: Hamlet

asks his father's ghost who killed him so that he “may sweep to revenge” (*Hamlet* 1.5. 31), and his father affirms to “let not the royal bed of Denmark be/ a couch for luxury and damned incest” (82-83) and that his son should “pursue this act” (84) of revenge. This identification with his father seems to intensify Hamlet's grief, allowing him to show signs of not melancholia rather than mourning, as he begins to exhibit depression, self-loss, and self-deprecation. He wishes "O that this too too sallied flesh would melt" (1.2. 129), and notes "how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (133-134), expressing his suicidal wondering and disillusionment with the world around him. He evidences further this loss and self-destruction of the ego when he begins acting verbally hostile toward himself: "I am very proud, revengeful,/ ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have/ thoughts to put them in" (3.1. 123-125). He continues these bouts of depression and self-loathing even when those around him are well over their grief for his father, and is even slighted and belittled for it by King Claudius, something Freud suggests leads to the self-deprecation that is another warning sign of melancholia:

But to persever
 in obstinate condolement is a course
 Of impious stubbornness, tis unmanly grief,
 It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
 A heart unfortified, or mind impatient,
 An understanding simple and unschool'd (1.2. 92-97)

Being constantly degraded by himself and those around him for not being able to move on, Hamlet meets Freud's requirements for a melancholic, and especially one who would develop sadistic tendencies in order to protect himself from further self-damage.

Identifying Hamlet as melancholic might then explain his often-cruel behavior toward Ophelia, as melancholia often leads to sadism, and sadism can cause the melancholic to lash out at those they lose. Thus, Ophelia may in fact be one of these loved ones—and taking into account Freud's psychoanalysis, there is evidence for that. The times Hamlet proclaims either in writing or speech that he loves Ophelia should probably not be considered heavily, as Hamlet tends to contradict himself and deliberately lie for the sake of his “feigned” madness, but his actions speak much louder. Although Hamlet should be focused entirely on validating Old Hamlet's ghost's story of betrayal, he takes the time to write to Ophelia, and then go speak with her alone—suggesting he at least has strong enough feelings to pay her a visit and demand her attention and prayers no matter how busy he may be: “Soft you now,/ The fair Ophelia. Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remembered” (3.1. 87-89). If Hamlet did not care deeply for Ophelia, he might not have wasted his time conversing with her and pursuing her concern after she had already told him by her father's suggestion they can no longer be together (1.4. 115-136). And because Ophelia bruises his ego further by breaking off their relationship, Hamlet's melancholia produces self-avenging sadistic urges, and his attempts at conversation turn into lashing out against Ophelia unprovoked. He attacks both her nature and her gender by telling her to “Get thee to a nunn'ry, farewell. Or if/ thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know/ well enough what monsters you make of them” (3.2. 136-138) and suggests that “God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another./ You jig and amble, and you [lisp,] you nickname God's/ creatures and make your wantonness [your] ignorance” (142-144). By insulting Ophelia, Hamlet's ego can avoid further self-deprecation by pinning the situation's misfortunes on her instead of confronting the possibility that she as a woman was right to turn him down. In that vein of thought, Hamlet may still love Ophelia after all, but is unable to deal

with that love combined with his self-rejection and rejection by others while in his melancholic state. It becomes too dangerous to a possibly-suicidal self, and his ego instead shies away from the love he has for Ophelia, resulting in Hamlet displaying completely opposing behavior to what he feels.

Though this is, of course, only one side of the coin—there is also a mountain of evidence to imply Hamlet does not care for Ophelia after all, or at least, not anymore. In that vein, through Freud's lens, this tendency to seek out and antagonize Ophelia may simply be a result of sadism attempting to preserve the ego by gaining pleasure through others' pain, and not a result of love at all. After all, Hamlet shows no immediate reaction to Ophelia's death, only gives an exaggerated performance later on to Laertes to antagonize him: “I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quality of love/ Make up my sum” (5.1. 255-257). This seeming declaration of love is more about provoking Ophelia's brother to gain more sadistic satisfaction than about the girl herself, and Hamlet essentially retracts this behavior and proclamation later: “I am very sorry, good Horatio,/ That to Laertes I forgot myself” (5.2. 75-76). If declaring love for Ophelia is “forgetting himself,” then Hamlet's “self” must not love her, and as it stands, Hamlet does not return to the subject of Ophelia for the rest of the play, as if he has forgotten her lost life entirely.

But then, he must be fixated on her throughout the play for some reason—and that reason can once again be attributed to sadistic tendencies brought on by his extensive melancholy. Perhaps Hamlet only makes an effort to pay attention to Ophelia and her family after she ends their relationship because he is aware subconsciously that she would be the perfect outlet for his self-destructive, melancholic pain. After all, the sadistic ego seeks to gain pleasure from hurting those around it, and Ophelia is easily hurt, and easily riled up after Hamlet belittles her:

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That suck'd the honey of his [music] vows,
 Now see [that] noble and most sovereign reason
 Like sweet bells jangled out of time, and harsh;
 That unmatch'd form and stature of blown youth
 Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me
 T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1. 154-160)

Ophelia is clearly hurt by the way Hamlet lashes out at her, as his former “music” has now injured her ears as “out of time, and harsh.” Upsetting Ophelia produces an obvious reaction, which would be able to grant Hamlet's ego the satisfaction it craves, and deflect its inward-facing grief back out to protect Hamlet. If Hamlet's only goal in talking to Ophelia after their relationship ends is to subconsciously gain gratification from shattering her feelings, then his behavior toward her may not be a result of sadistically wanting to hurt those he loves, but simply wanting to hurt those who are easy to “derive satisfaction” from.

Trying to make sense of both of these angles creates the decisive conclusion that Freud's discussion of melancholia and sadism can be used as a guide to evidence both Hamlet loving Ophelia and Hamlet simply using Ophelia. This ambiguity and unanswered question may be a frustrating facet of Hamlet's character, but in his melancholic state, Hamlet never really answers any of the questions he provokes, simply aiming hypocritical behavior and sadism at others any chance he can get. He claims, “I essentially am not in madness” (3.4. 187), then exhibits wildly erratic behavior; he swears vengeance upon Claudius for his father's murder (1.5. 112), but does not seem to care about his own murder of Polonius (3.4. 26-29). This suggests that as a melancholic, Hamlet prefers not to explain his behavior or emotions, but instead to lash out at

everything and everyone around him, making it impossible to say how he feels about anything in particular—especially Ophelia. But through Freud's methodology, this makes sense: whether someone is loved by the mourner or not, they can end up treated harshly as a result of the ego's self-defense. The ambiguity of Hamlet's feelings for Ophelia is not a problem; it is to be expected that he is undecipherable while in a melancholic state. Even if we cannot know if Hamlet loves Ophelia or not, it can still be understood why he treats her the way he does, and that as a sadistic melancholic, he would treat her cruelly if he loved her or didn't love her. Thus, Hamlet's inexplicability is an inevitable result of his psychological state.

In essence, Freud's theory on mourning and melancholia might not answer the question of whether Hamlet loves or does not love Ophelia, but it does answer *why* there is no definitive answer. It also makes clear why Hamlet treats her in the harsh way he does: because that is how a sadistic melancholic treats everyone when they are in their depressed state. It's not personal; it doesn't depend on love; it's a defense of the ego, nothing more. This results in a confusing character, and a confusing relationship between him and the woman he is supposed to have fallen for. But Shakespeare is known for that ambiguity, for that “negative capability,” for leaving mysteries unsolved to outline the complexity of a character's psyche. Freud, meanwhile, allows us to make sense of this psyche. To try and pin down Hamlet's feelings is an impossible task, but it should not leave frustration in its wake. Not knowing is not a result of a problem, but the result of a character grappling with the unavoidable effects of melancholia.

Works Cited

- Bozanich, Robert. "The Eye of the Beholder: Hamlet to Ophelia, II. ii. 109-24." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31.1 (1980): 90-95. Web.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth. 243-58.
- Keats, John. "To George and Thomas Keats: ['Negative Capability']" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Granblatt. 9th ed. Vol. D. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Ed. Susanne Lindgren Wofford. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's Press, 1994. Print.
- .