

# HAMLET AS A STUDY IN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

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My audacious intrusion into the overcrowded field of studies of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was originally occasioned, or provoked, by the publication in 1923 of a book of Freudian essays (10) containing a psychoanalysis of Hamlet of much earlier date by the late Dr. Ernest Jones (9) who afterward published a much improved version (11) which has become widely known. I read the original essay at the time with keen interest tinged with controversial animus.

For some years previously I had been a Shakespearean actor, and had played several different parts in about 90 performances of this tragedy. I had thus gained an intimate knowledge of the play and some acquaintance with the literature of its interpretation. Since I had subsequently become a student of psychology, of the school of Alfred Adler, I found in what I was learning from him a new and revealing aspect of the complex character of Hamlet.

This study of *Hamlet* is, in substance, a lecture which I gave before the London branch of the International Society for Individual Psychology in 1928 or 1929.<sup>1</sup> It was never published in English and my original draft for it did not survive; but shortly after the date of the lecture a German translation was printed (13). Of this the editor kindly sent me a retranslation into English, and he suggested that the original, or a revision if I cared to make one, would be of considerable interest.

The result is more than a revision—it is a rewriting and sizable expansion of what I said in our old Gower Street premises 40 years ago. If it proves of interest to contemporary readers, it may stimulate efforts of some of them who are extending and illustrating the principles of Individual Psychology in application to cultural and historical phenomena.

## THE ENIGMA OF HAMLET

Has Individual Psychology—that is, the principles of character analysis we owe to Alfred Adler—anything to contribute to the understanding of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? This is a legitimate question.

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<sup>1</sup>In fact Mr. Mairet was a regular lecturer at the International Society for Individual Psychology, London, wrote a book on Adlerian psychology (12), and edited most successfully one of Adler's books (2).—Ed. note.

For three centuries, Shakespeare's masterpiece has been the most important of all European plays. The attention that it commands, both in dramatic literature and in the theater, is if anything increasing in our own time. And at least ever since the middle of the eighteenth century, each successive phase of new psychological understanding has produced—or tried to produce—some fresh elucidation of Hamlet's enigmatic character. They have mostly succeeded, up to a point, even those which have tended to deepen the "mystery" as the secret of the play's extraordinary magnetism—which it is, to a great degree.

By "mystery" in this sense, however, such critics do not mean that it cannot be understood, but only that the truth it contains cannot be put into the frame of a logical explanation. This is of the nature of psychological truth, although various explanations in words can contribute to an understanding of it. As we shall see, I hope, the Adlerian principles of explanation can throw light upon this enigma because they are coherent, but also manifold and complementary.

Although *Hamlet* is about a mysterious murder, we are not kept in suspense about who committed the murder. We are told that at the very beginning, by the spirit of the murdered man himself. The mystery is the inability of the man who suffers most from this crime, to take any clear action about it. It was this which made *Hamlet* such a revolution in dramatic art. Even in his own previous dramas, Shakespeare was fascinated by action, a great revealer of the motives that move persons to action. But in this play he was laying bare the springs of *inaction*; dealing with the entanglements of man's conscious, reflective life. This was a tremendous innovation.

In Greek drama, for instance, each play presents us with an interaction between characters dominated by the fundamental forces of human motivation, often presented as divinities. Human though they are, they are driven, for good or ill, by superhuman or infra-human powers—and *fate*, in whose network all are enmeshed, becomes the symbol of the mystery. In this Renaissance masterpiece, on the other hand, the events of the drama are produced by motives which are commonplace and events such as were ordinary news-items about the contemporary squabbles, crimes and intrigues in the courts of all the European dynasties, and would hardly shock an Elizabethan playgoer. The terrible, inexplicable thing is the behavior and attitude of the play's hero, a puzzle he is highly conscious of, but cannot solve.

Let us look at his situation. Purely objectively, it is unfavorable

enough. Hamlet is heir to the throne, but the king, his father, has mysteriously died, and his uncle has married the queen, his mother, and made himself king. For obvious reasons, they want to keep Hamlet under observation; they will not allow him to go back to the university. He is in a state of despair, when he learns from the ghost of his father that the usurper of the crown was also his assassin and the seducer of his queen.

But the dramatist makes it clear that Hamlet's situation is not objectively hopeless. A Renaissance prince in his position, with his gifts and intelligence, would be almost expected (by the political *morale* of the age) to mount a counter-conspiracy—and do so successfully, for we are told that he is more popular than his uncle. And as soon as the ghost of his father confirms what was already the intuition of his “prophetic soul” (that his father was murdered), he breaks out into a tremendous soliloquy to the effect that he will now devote his whole life to vengeance upon the wicked uncle: that he will kill him with his own hand. But—it is a big “but”—he keeps this to himself. He does not trust the two companions who told him about the ghost and are obviously loyal to him personally (one of them is his most intimate friend).

That might be no more than prudence; but we soon see that the underlying motive is more like a distrust of himself. This first act ends with his exclamation, not that he will carry out his resolution, but that the age he lives in is to blame: “O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!” Already one has a premonition that his grandiose project of revenge will (to quote a later phrase of his) become “sicklified o'er with the pale cast of thought.”

Why should a man with no lack of courage, intelligence or even ambition, prove unequal to this challenge? That, in a sentence, is the “problem” of Hamlet, which holds our sympathy and attention to the bitter end.

#### EARLIER INTERPRETATIONS

In early times the public seems to have taken the play naively for its melodramatic action, paying little attention to the hero's hesitations, as if they were only natural in view of the difficulty of fulfilling his task. The action may still hold the attention of many people simply at that level; but this would not account for its enduring power to fascinate multitudes, even in translations. There can be no doubt that, even though we cannot account for Hamlet's contra-

dictory and self-defeating behavior, we are gripped by an intuitive feeling that the play is nevertheless true to life.

Goethe comments in *Wilhelm Meister* that Hamlet was "a beautiful, pure and moral character, but without the nervous strength that makes the hero. He regards every duty as holy, but this one as too difficult" (8, Bk. 4, Chapt. 13). The truth in this poetic appraisal of Goethe's was unfortunately elaborated by Coleridge (6) and others, and produced the sentimental Hamlet which dominated the stage for many decades. Coleridge's view was that Hamlet's super-normal intelligence made him see so many sides of every question that he was unable to pursue one decisive line of action. This was all too true of Coleridge himself; but Hamlet is shown as by no means incapable of decision; he vacillates only in this matter of avenging his father's murder, and the reasons he then finds for inaction arise from something other than his intelligence, something obscure to himself.

This was first seen clearly by critics of Hegelian inspiration, who pointed to an inner conflict. This they attributed to Hamlet's moral conscience, which forbade revenge as unworthy of a civilized human being; a respectable view of the question, but it finds no support in the text. On the contrary, there is no reason to doubt Hamlet's declaration that he feels he is impelled to his revenge by heaven as well as hell. As the rightful sovereign he is appointed to punish evildoers.

Bradley(5), in the most thorough criticism of *Hamlet*, reviewed all the previous interpretations; and prepared us for the shock of seeing the drama in the light of modern psychology. He was the first to recognize the importance of Hamlet's attitude to the mother who had betrayed his father. Hamlet's conflict between love for his mother and implacable hatred of her crime produces depression. Bradley describes the condition in detail.

Adler apparently subscribed to the early idea that Hamlet's hesitation was due to the difficult task before him; he also thought that Shakespeare was exploring in this drama, as in many others, "the border between culturally permissible and impermissible murder" (1, 211n). But these are passing allusions, and, while the first is of course true as far as it goes, Adler was not evaluating the Prince's case as a whole.

#### THE FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION

Apart from certain exaggerations, the psychoanalytic theory of *Hamlet* is deeper and more comprehensive than any of those we have

mentioned. In this view, Hamlet's case represents an extreme exacerbation of a "complex" which is present in every male human being.

This is the complex of emotional attitudes towards the parents that Freud named the Oedipus complex, after the Greek tragedy of *King Oedipus*. Freud regarded this as the fundamental complex, of which practically all the others are symptomatic or derivative. It was an insight of genius to see, as Freud did, a symbolical presentation of the human psychological predicament in the fate of Oedipus, confirming and illuminating his own experience as a man and a psychiatrist. The great Greek drama, of the man who discovers that without knowing it he has killed his father and married his mother, is widely different, indeed, from that of Hamlet. But both these poetic creations illustrate, very convincingly, the theory of unconscious motivation at which Freud had arrived. No one, I suppose, who has read much Freudian literature can now see Hamlet without thinking of the psychoanalytic interpretation, and feeling the force of it.

And yet, how far does it go, this wonderful analysis, to elucidate what is, after all, the central theme and fascination of the play? What does it tell us of Hamlet, the unique individual person, of the values, aims and ambitions by which he lives? Why, nothing at all! It does not examine him from that point of view. It uses him to illustrate a deep insight into the instinctive emotions *common to all men*—an aspect, so to speak, of universal psychology. But what grips us in this play, what makes Hamlet a great drama, is precisely his *individual* psychology. And to understand that, we had better consult Adler.

For in truth, the Freudian analysis, stemming as it does from a mechanistic biology and never really transcending such presuppositions, studies the human being as the highest species of animal—which in part man is—and reduces all that makes him distinctively man to that infra-human level. It is all too true, as that great expositor of Freud, Roland Dalbiez wrote, that "The contribution of Freud is the profoundest study known to history, of that which, in man, is not the most human" (7).

#### THE ADLERIAN APPROACH

Now, it is just the unique individuality of every one, which is man's paramount distinction; this is what Adler always looked for.

This would have governed his approach to *Hamlet*. And because man is the only animal who thinks, that approach demands particular attention to what he thinks, trying to discern the essential presuppositions that his thinking implies. Let us try to consider the tragic hero's personality from this point of view.

What Adler calls the individual "style of life" is always implicit in his way of thinking. "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he," to quote a Biblical aphorism. His thinking, whether it be ignorant or learned, logical or illogical, is always conditioned by prior conceptions of himself, of other persons and of the wider world, and the goal to which he is aspiring—with more or less awareness. Adler frequently traced these preconceptions back to the earliest childhood of his patients, not so much to discover the past conditions under which they were formed, but rather to detect the child's reaction to them—for even at the very beginning, the child's interpretation of what happens to it has the stamp of its own individuality. Shakespeare tells us nothing about Hamlet's infancy. But his hero is a great thinker and talker: and early in the play we are given a clue to his style of thinking.

#### ALL OR NOTHING ATTITUDE

Led by two companions to the place where they have seen the ghost of his father, the Prince is waiting for this spectre to re-appear. They converse a little, to ease the tension of expectation. Distant sounds of drunken revelry at the court are borne to them on the night air, which leads Hamlet to comment on the bibulous habit of the Danes and deplore its effect on their reputation abroad.

From this he proceeds to a more general observation about honor and reputation. However fine a man's character and reputation may be, he says, it may be ruined by a single defect, whether it be something inborn that he cannot help, or a trait of character developed to excess, or simply some habit against good manners.

..... that these men  
 Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect . . .  
 Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace,  
 As infinite as man may undergo,  
 Shall in the general censure take corruption  
 From that particular fault (Act I, Sc. 4).

We are not concerned with the philosophic value of this reflection but with the man who utters it. Precisely at such a moment, when

he is in a state of vital apprehension and suspense, any observation a man makes about life in general is apt to be symptomatic of his dominant, habitual preconceptions— of what Adler called his “schema of apperception” (3, pp. 181-186). Here, Hamlet’s remark combines the highest ideal of man with a doubt of its being realizable. One fault can ruin everything. Throughout the play we find Hamlet’s mind falling back upon this kind of perfectionism combined with pessimism—it takes very varied forms. Hamlet is not satisfied with what merely approaches perfection; when it is not everything, he counts it as nothing. Adler spoke of this as the all-or-nothing attitude (2, p. 55; 3, p. 294).

We saw this as soon as the ghost confirmed Hamlet’s worst suspicions about his mother and his uncle. His passionate tirade of grief and anger is fully accounted for by the horror of the revelation—but not the form it takes, which is typically his own. After vowing to obey the ghost and avenge his father, Hamlet promises himself that he will wipe out of his memory everything that has charmed him either in life or literature.

And this commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter: yes, by heaven (Act I, Sc. 5).

Again this means, everything or nothing. It is permeated by the idea to become necessarily the best avenger. Hamlet is incapable of seeing objectively that the punishment which is to be executed on his uncle has to represent an act of justice. Rather, in accordance with his striving for self-esteem, his goal is to become an exalted avenger. But instantly after expressing this, reviling his mother’s perfidy and his uncle’s hypocrisy, the thought strikes him that:

A man may smile and smile, and be a villain.

and the aphorism appeals to him. He takes out his notebook and writes it down.

Hamlet is very much an intellectual; all his close acquaintances seem to be university comrades. And here he is, passionately resolving to become something quite different—a mono-maniacal man of action. Shakespeare, in one of his deft surprises, shows us how much we are to believe in this resolution.

#### THE GOAL OF GODLIKENESS

The goal of godlikeness (3, p. 245) was one of Adler’s terms for a characteristic he often found in persons who isolate themselves from

other people. They compensate for the feeling of inadequacy by cherishing some kind of exalted, unrealistic ideal. Without knowing the previous development or the origin of Hamlet's sense of inferiority, we can see it is very marked and we find it closely linked with his ideality. When he bursts out with these words:

I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse myself of such things that it were better my mother had not borne men (Act III, Sc. 1),

he is trying to kill Ophelia's love for him, it is true. But when he is alone, after entertaining the travelling actors, his self-accusation is even more bitter:

O! what a rogue and peasant slave am I:  
Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul . . . . .  
. . . . . it cannot be  
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter . . . (Act II, Sc. 2).

And so on. No character in Shakespeare indulges in such orgies of self-contempt. In fact, we know that he has plenty of courage and all too much pride. The pride perverts the courage, by prompting him to action that is impossibly perfect and heroic.

After the play within the play his mother sends a message summoning Hamlet to see her before he goes to bed. He complies, and on the way to her rooms he happens to spy his uncle Claudius alone, on his knees trying to pray. Confronted by the image of his crime, and alarmed by realization that Hamlet must know it, the king mistakes his fear of the consequences for repentance (a common confusion of mind) and is endeavoring to frame an appeal to Heaven. He does not see the entry of the avenger, Hamlet, who at the end of the previous scene had cried out:

. . . . . now could I drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on (Act III, Sc. 2).

The Prince could not have a better opportunity, or be in a better mood, to obey the ghost and kill the criminal. He draws his sword to do so; but is suddenly checked by a thought like that which previously kept him from suicide. He refrained from that because it would not have been perfect suicide; and now, if he killed the usurper,



would it be perfect revenge? Might he not go to heaven, penitent and forgiven? No, better wait to kill him when he is

. . . . about some act

That has no relish of salvation in it (Act III, Sc. 3).

So once more, he will not do it *yet*. Not even when the moment is objectively ideal for a palace-revolution, when the king had given cause for public suspicion by his behavior at the play!

Procrastination due to such contrary motives as Hamlet's is the "hesitating attitude" that Adler described as part of the "distance" behavior when he found it in neurotic people (3, pp. 273-274). The neurotic character of this type keeps his distance from reality, for reality always threatens to involve him in something less than the ideal triumph he demands. Hamlet often draws comparisons with a godlike, ideal human character, which he equates with that of his father: but the father is dead; there is no one like that now.

The feeling that he is a person who will have everything perfect enhances the kind of self-esteem which is all a person has when he has lost contact with others. Anything less might expose him to some taint of what he feels as the supreme evil—humiliation.

#### LACK OF SOCIAL FEELING

Terrible as they are, Hamlet's circumstances are of the stuff that high political life was made of at the Renaissance. What interested Shakespeare, however, and still holds audiences spellbound, is the Prince's character, which is vividly contrasted with that of Laertes, whom we soon see in an equally frightful situation, when he discovers that Hamlet has killed his father, wronged his sister, and driven her to suicide. But Laertes wastes no time caressing an ideal of vengeance or criticizing himself. He promptly gets up a sizable revolt, and then joins in a plot to kill his stronger enemy by trickery.

Hamlet is not above trickery, but he never thinks of raising a rebellion, although the treacherous kind has reason to fear that if he did, the people might rally to him as the rightful heir to the throne. Why is it that this idea never occurs to Hamlet? In searching for an answer let us consider Adler's principles of compensation and of social interest.

According to these, anyone feeling inadequate, and therefore unequal to what life and other people require of him, invariably tries to make up for his deficiency by over-playing his strongest suit, so to

speaking—for instance by intellectual brilliance, which is probably Hamlet's case. This may be a solution successful enough, if the subject has enough *social feeling* to keep him (or her) in good, healthy relations with other persons (3, p. 154).

But if the social feeling is deficient, and if in the course of time the demands of social life suddenly become formidable (either really, or according to the subject's own schema of apperception) such a man or woman quickly sees that this over-compensation (which has hitherto proved reliable enough) is of no help, irrelevant to the real situation. Then you may see breakdown, or, in a stronger subject such as Hamlet, there will be a resort to evasion of the issue, with occasional irritable attempts to force himself. These efforts will be emotional and ill-judged, therefore ineffectual. And then you are likely to get self-disgust at the failure; self-accusation which, of course, deepens the feeling of inferiority and makes the subject's situation worse.

Hamlet's right course would be to confide in friends whose judgment he can trust and to gain their cooperation. But he, like anyone else whose fictive goals have become too godlike, has no real friends. Such a person's habitual way with others has been always to charm or to dominate them.

Horatio has the qualities we should expect to find in the friend of a man like Hamlet. Horatio genuinely admires and loves the Prince, but receives only some of his intimate confidences. However, he does not take his friend into his confidence—this, after all, would lead to action. Horatio never talks to him quite as an equal, nor admonishes him to take a more realistic line of conduct. He serves Hamlet devotedly but never faces him like a brother: the worthy Horatio presents so little clear individuality that the role is almost what actors call "a feeding part." The speech in which Hamlet praises Horatio's undoubted virtues ends on a note of slight embarrassment on Hamlet's part, for having said so much. Only in the last part of the tragedy, does Horatio acquire more importance, partly because Hamlet has been changed by the defeat and victimization he has suffered, and is in greater need of companionship.

Now there are men, as we know all too well, who may be just as isolated as Hamlet and much more deficient in social conscience, who are capable of collecting colleagues by means of phoney propaganda and false professions of loyalty: but Hamlet is morally above that kind of thing. What is he to do, then? Something he must do, for if

the murderer of his father suspects that Hamlet knows about the crime, his life will be in danger.

He plays for time. As we saw, the only two persons who know he has seen his father's ghost are sworn to secrecy; and, as he had warned them, he takes evasive action by pretending to be mad, which he can do brilliantly. Further isolated by this behavior, he spends weeks in gloomy contemplation of his problem, and of his failure to solve it.

Hamlet was, and perhaps is in love with Ophelia the Lord Chamberlain's daughter, the sister of Laertes, but he seeks to extricate himself from the love which he had previously sought and won from her. Evidently he will not now trust her, partly because she is too much under her father's control, and also because horror at his mother's treachery has set him against woman in general. As for the oft-debated question whether Hamlet really loves Ophelia, there is no reason to doubt his own statement that he "did love her once," but we cannot believe that this love was ever a profound self-commitment. A man so constantly concerned with the image of himself cannot be a very good lover even under normal circumstances. Such a man has a fear of woman, from the "instinctive" intuition that she can be the greatest danger to his ego-ideal (and in fact, a real love is very likely to "cut him down to size").

#### AROUSAL OF EMOTIONS

When the troupe of strolling actors arrives, Hamlet is genuinely pleased: he is a keen playgoer. He immediately calls upon one of them to rehearse "a passionate speech."

A man in Hamlet's position, frustrated by an inhibition from an action he has determined to carry out, is tempted to imagine that he might do the deed if only he could get into a state of emotion strong enough to carry him through it—in this case, by getting into a towering rage. At several moments Hamlet returns to this idea; and indeed, it is passion that finally goads him to fulfillment of his vow. According to Adler, we use our feelings and emotions to serve our purposes (3, pp. 226-227).

But Hamlet has far to go before he fulfills his vow. In the present scene, when the actor obliges his patron with a passionate speech, the scene he is describing moves the elocutionist himself to real tears. But Hamlet, seeing such a display of feeling "But in a fiction, in a dream of passion," is moved to a furious soliloquy of self-accusation, from which we have already quoted a few lines (see p. 9). If this

poor player can get so worked up over old and imaginary wrongs, why can he, Hamlet, not get up steam enough to revenge a terrible, real and immediate crime?

In this way, Hamlet does lash himself into an irrevocable act—he determines to make the actors “play something like the murder of my father” before the murderer himself. This time he *has* taken a decisive step. But doing so in a state of passionate emotion, is, of course, really to give up responsibility and turn everything over to the dark forces of the “unconscious.”

It is noteworthy that Hamlet finds himself a pretext, which looks like an excuse, for this ill-judged project: he says its effect on the king will tell him whether the ghost’s information was true. But he never doubted that before, and we can hardly believe it is his real motive now.

Anyway, Hamlet has now committed himself to an immediate action that will effect *something*, whether for good or ill. Yet from this, his most momentous decision, he has the most ominous recoil. While the players are rehearsing, he is soliloquizing again, but to a very different tune—“To be or not to be” (Act III, Sc. 1). Had he not better kill himself? He has entertained this idea before (Act I, Sc. 2) but dismissed it as against the law of God. But now, he rejects suicide for a more characteristic reason: it may not be perfectly effectual; there might be a life after death, possibly a worse one.

The play within the play does “catch the conscience of the King” just as Hamlet meant it to. This clever device also puts his own life in jeopardy and puts everybody in alarm and confusion. But he is tremendously excited and voluble at his momentary success. How to follow it up, he has not the least idea, but he exhibits the sense of release, amounting to exaltation, of a man who feels he has escaped from intolerable tension by setting events in motion, and no longer cares whither he may be carried along by them.

#### DEPRECIATION TENDENCY AND PESSIMISM

After the play within the play, when Hamlet’s mother receives him, as he thinks, alone, she has Polonius hiding behind a curtain. She receives him with a hauteur that shows she is accustomed to ascendancy over him; but he meets her attempt to reprove him with a fierceness of accusation which terrifies her. We are reminded again that Shakespeare has given us no indication of the nature of Hamlet’s relationship to his mother before the time at which the play begins.

We can only surmise that he was her only child, which suggests the probability that he enjoyed an uncontested closeness with her, and that he was pampered by her.

We know from the play that she has driven him from his realm. She has conceded to another the place which rightfully belongs to him.

Terrified, she calls for help to the hidden Lord Chancellor, who in his turn cries for help, upon which Hamlet runs his sword through the curtain, thinking that the eavesdropper is the king. The Prince's reaction to the discovery that he has killed Ophelia's father is completely callous. He proceeds immediately with his long and bitter indictment of the mother, whose infidelity he hates even more than the crime of the stepfather whom he never even respected; whereas she has outraged the elemental image of love. He leaves his mother with coldly wounding words.

Earlier he had also wounded Ophelia, when hard upon his soliloquy on suicide, she comes in, at her father's advice, to return the presents Hamlet has given her (Act III, Sc. 1). We know that he had been trying to kill her love for him, but this proof of apparent success arouses him to fierce resentment. Many actors have tried to soften Hamlet's brutality in this scene, by suggesting moments of irrepressible tenderness between the lines. But Hamlet having just rejected escape by suicide is again committed to the passions he had previously invoked.

Adler described the striving for godlikeness as often associated with a depreciation tendency. "As a demigod," such a person "exalts himself above humankind and . . . depreciates everyone else and puts them in the shade" (4, p. 117). This combination is also often associated with cruelty as another manifestation of the desire "to dominate . . . by depreciating others" (4, p. 117).

Hamlet also resorts to pessimism. To spend time elaborating the darkest aspects of the human condition can take the mind off its obsession with thoughts of one's own inadequacy. After his return to the palace we hear little from Hamlet about his duty to avenge the crime or of his inability to do so, but much more about the wickedness of man and the tragedy of life. Partly this is due to the fact that his position is now worse than ever. Laertes has come back from abroad at the news of his father's death, to demand satisfaction for it; he also finds his sister mad, just before she drowns herself. Hamlet is in no shape to meet his more realistic opponents: he has taken

flight into pessimism; in a mood of philosophic resignation he is leaving the solution of his problem to fate.

In the scene in the cemetery, beside the grave dug for Ophelia, he broods over a skull thrown up by the sexton, indulges in fantasies which show the same pattern of thought as the speech we first quoted (Act I, Sc. 4). There, it was a small fault that destroyed a fine character; and now he says:

Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion in the earth? . . . And smelt so? Pah! . . . Alexander returneth to dust . . . and why, of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel?"

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away (Act V, Sc. 1).

Why this talk of the futility of being an Alexander or a Caesar? Hamlet himself is the rightful heir to a little kingdom. But throughout the play, he expresses no serious thought of ascending the throne. An Adlerian psychologist would suspect that this man's idealization of man is not meant for use, but is a reassurance against a feeling of inadequacy (which is both the effect and the continuing cause of too little social feeling); and that is what makes him balk at the thought of being put to the test of great responsibility in the world of realities. For this is the man who said in an earlier scene:

Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams (Act II, Sc. 2).

Such a man could be happy in his mind, enjoying in his isolation a wealth of ideas and imaginations, if only the real world did not break in like a recurrent nightmare.

But here, in this cemetery scene, his self-love receives a mortal blow. The cortège arrives for Ophelia's burial: Laertes leaps into the grave after the corpse in a paroxysm of grief, declaiming curses upon his sister's false lover; and at this Hamlet reveals himself, electrified by passion, and assaults his accuser. They fight over the grave till they are forcibly parted; and Hamlet then bursts into a magniloquent declaration that his own love for Ophelia was greater than that of 40,000 brothers, etc.

Then, as suddenly, the torrent of rhetoric dries up: he realizes that he is ranting; even tries to atone for the exhibition he has given by a very lame apology to Laertes, which is naturally rejected, for in fact it amounts to asking Laertes to explain *his* behavior, when Hamlet

knows he was the aggressor. Then he goes away, attempting to cover his retreat by putting on a momentary act of the madness he can mimic so cleverly.

What does this mean? No doubt the unwonted loss of self-control is occasioned by some remorse for his treatment of Ophelia. But the flamboyant claim that his love for her was so prodigious—this springs from a more sensitive nerve. How else can he defend his invaluable image of himself, now openly branded as that of a false lover? His behavior is the picture of a “godlike striving” repudiating any suggestion that the *intentions* inspired by its lofty goal were ever less than perfect.

#### CONCLUSION

When we applied to Shakespeare’s creation terms derived from the study of neuroses, this does not mean that we can write Hamlet off as a neurotic. I do not think Adler would have applied that term to Hamlet, although this was the title given to my earlier paper (13). But Adler’s concepts are applicable to everyone in some degree, for they represent fundamental insights into human nature.

Neurosis is a clinical term denoting definite symptoms of a morbid character. The neurotic person makes use of such symptoms to pursue his own illusory goal of superiority. Hamlet has no such symptoms but he exhibits the fundamental dilemmas of a mind pursuing its fictive goal of superiority in the face of harsh realities that it cannot cope with. He still pursues what he feels to be an objective duty, and ultimately fulfils it, though at the greatest cost to himself and others.

He is not mad at all; you cannot make drama out of pathology, though madness may be introduced as an element in the whole (as it is here in the case of Ophelia). Hamlet’s tragedy would not have the human power that it has, if he did not personify for us the nobility as well as the limitations of human nature, and its liability to self-deception.

When the king and Laertes entice Hamlet to the fencing-match in which they kill him ostensibly by an accident, he is easy game. If this is a trap, as he too thinks likely, he would rather stroll into it with dignity. And he does so, against Horatio’s wiser advice.

We might say that his pessimism has turned to pure fatalism, but it is also tinged with a belief in Providence:

We defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of all he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be (Act V, Sc. 2).

He delivers himself into his enemies' hands with this utterance of noble resignation worthy of a Stoic philosopher. But it is deceptive. The plotters have mistaken their man. No sooner does he feel the prick of Laertes' unbuttoned foil but he guesses treachery; gets his opponent's poisoned weapon with a brilliant flankonade and turns it against him with equally deadly effect. And at his mother's scream, after sipping the poisoned wine that the king has ready for Hamlet in case the other poison fails, Hamlet pounces upon the villanous king like a stoat on a rabbit and kills him with the envenomed foil. No other tragedy ends with such bloody celerity and unexpected decision.

We may remember how this complicated hero first greeted the revelation of his father's murder:

Haste me to know it, that I on wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love  
May sweep to my revenge (Act I, Sc. 5).

What sort of wings are these—"meditation" and "love"—for flying to a political assassination! Not those that got him there in the end: these were the wings that kept him in the clouds until the play had to end on a stage littered with corpses, including his own.

Adler once said that at the bottom of the neurotic character there is a self-delusion: In reality the man could dance with the load under which he is stalling and staggering like Atlas bearing the world on his shoulders. Yes, he *could*, and sometimes he does, but only if and when reality takes him inescapably by the throat. Then at last the godlike ambition vanishes and he acts with a vigor nobody expected, himself least of all.

A goal of godlikeness vanishes when the individual responds to the demands of reality—and as Adler has pointed out, this is a *social reality*. Hamlet's tragedy is that he cannot take his friends into his confidence, since this would, after all, lead to action; and he cannot bring about the action which the situation is demanding because in order to do so he would have to join with others on an equal footing as co-conspirators, and descend from the height of his noble spirit and enter the common battle for a desecrated crown. This is deplorable, for if he had dedicated only a part of his strong powers to the service



of the state, or the public, he would, without a doubt, have justified the opinion of Fortinbras:

For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have proved most royally . . . (Act V, Sc. 2).

The creations of literary genius embody truths about man's nature which are timeless and universal, but they do this, necessarily, by presenting men and women under the historic and cultural conditions of a particular age, which is that of the creative artist himself. According to the conditions and ethics of the time, the performance of the task imposed upon Hamlet was indeed difficult but still possible. An impossible predicament would be no subject for a drama. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* portrays a man of the late Renaissance, the age of the emancipation and the idealization of the individual man. It was the sunset of a great tradition which had been based on the immemorial character-ideals of the saint or the hero, dedicated to the defense of God-given values. All this was fading before the new ideals of individual attainment.

Hamlet's speeches are full of this homage to the ideal of self-sufficient man, for he is left to face life on the basis of his own and acquired ideas of what life means—ideas more or less unexamined in default of any accepted communal criterion.

Hamlet's ego-ideal contains elements that are admirable in themselves, but pursued privately, as his own possession, it becomes dogmatic, an attitude of superiority to others and to the world. If, as in the case we have reviewed (for the poet's creation was true to life) a highly conscious striving, with potential insight into social reality, is obstructed by an exalted goal too exacting for the situation it encounters—then the subject may capitulate to pessimism, apathy, or at best to an unreal resignation.

The individual depends for his salvation or perdition upon that which determines his conscious orientation to life. At bottom, it is a question of his real presuppositions about the meaning of life. It is Adler's deep insight into this truth of human nature which, in my humble view, gives his therapeutic method a clear superiority to that of the psychoanalytic tradition.

And this, I submit, is also the reason why Adler arrived, in his own way, at a theistic position: he said that God is the best idea. "The best conception . . . of this ideal elevation of mankind is the concept of God" (3, p. 107). In Adler's view, psychic health was a

function of a convergence between the person's fictive ideal of individuality (which is always imperfect) and his feeling of unity with other persons. On the plane of psychology, this is very like a way of stating the First and Second commandments of the Law, hallowed equally in the Hebrew and the Christian traditions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The two commandments of the Law are: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."—Ed. note.