Hamlet in Cinema: Oedipus Lives On

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I have often questioned why Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a play more than 400 years old, remains tied to a century-old Freudian concept. Since Freud’s Oedipus Complex has been disproven, what purpose does it still serve and why are directors still intrigued by this interpretation of Hamlet? In 1949, Dr. Ernest Jones published his book, Hamlet and Oedipus (1949), but at the time he was also collaborating with Laurence Olivier to create the first movie adaptation of Hamlet to embrace the Oedipus Complex. I believe that because of Jones and Olivier Shakespeare’s Hamlet will always be connected to psychoanalysis. While the Oedipus Complex may not be mentioned often by modern Shakespearean scholars, we still see it heavily influencing cinema, even 21st-century productions of Hamlet. New generations of audiences are still introduced to psychoanalysis by actors and directors, who bring Hamlet to life. I argue that cinematic interpretations of Hamlet reflect the changing psychological views of their day and continue to influence the audience’s knowledge of—and attitude toward—the field of psychoanalysis by exploring the psyche of Hamlet. This paper will offer a sampling of psychoanalysis in cinema and how it has changed over time by examining three movie productions: Laurence Olivier’s 1948 Hamlet, Franco Zeffirelli’s 1990 Hamlet, and Robert Icke’s 2018 Hamlet.

Psychoanalysis Review

While some aspects of psychoanalysis are still found relevant and useful today, other aspects, like Freud’s Oedipus Complex, have not retained the same validity. According to Dr. Susan Krauss Whitbourne:

Psychologists today talk about the psychodynamic, not the psychoanalytic perspective. As such, this perspective refers to the dynamic forces within our personalities whose shifting movements underlie much of the basis for our observable behavior. Psychoanalysis is a much narrower term referring to the Freudian-based notion that to understand, and treat, abnormal behavior, our unconscious conflicts must be worked through. (qtd. in Cherry).

1 Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus.

2 Cherry, “How Psychoanalysis Influenced the Field of Psychology.”
This means that though psychoanalysis may not be applied often in modern psychology, the ideas it sparked, especially how to approach mental illness, were very instrumental to modern methods and views of mental health.

In 1899 Freud introduced the Oedipus Complex as “a desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex and a concomitant sense of rivalry with the parent of the same sex; a crucial stage in the normal developmental process. Sigmund Freud introduced the concept in his [book] Interpretation of Dreams (1899)” (Britannica). But Freud borrowed the name from Greek mythology: Oedipus: King of Thebes, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Around 429 BCE, Sophocles wrote an Athenian tragedy called Oedipus Rex, mentioned often in Aristotle’s Poetics. In the play, Oedipus has become the king of Thebes while unwittingly fulfilling a prophecy that he would kill his father, Laius (the previous king), and marry his mother, Jocasta. In the play, Oedipus searches for the murderer of Laius (his father) in order to end a plague ravaging Thebes, unaware that the killer he is looking for is himself. The play ends in death: Oedipus horrified at his patricide and incest proceeds to gouge out his own eyes in despair, and Jocasta (his mother) hangs herself.

Some scholars argue that the Oedipus Complex cannot be a valid reading of Hamlet since Freud was born after Shakespeare, but Oedipus Rex was written well before Shakespeare lived. In fact, the similarities between young and Oedipus are uncanny for lack of a better word. Both cause the death of their mother through rash decisions while seeking revenge for their father. Regardless of Hamlet’s connection to the original Greek play, I argue that the Oedipus Complex is still hinted at and sometimes fully embraced in modern interpretations of Hamlet, and we owe that more to Sir Ernest Jones than we do to Freud. Dr. Ernest Jones, a Welsh neurologist, was the
first to apply a full-scale psychoanalytic treatment of Hamlet in an essay in *The American Journal of Psychology* in 1910 (he later revised and expanded this article into a book in 1949). He was the first English-speaking academic to talk about the Oedipus Complex and is a big reason it became mainstream in English-speaking countries.

Jones argued that Hamlet, a psychoneurotic, “suffered from manic-depressive hysteria combined with an abulia (an inability to exercise will power and come to decisions)—all of which may be traced to the hero’s severely repressed oedipal feelings.” Concerning the hesitancy of Hamlet to act on his Ghost Father’s wishes, Jones stated that, “Hamlet does not fulfill this duty until absolutely forced to do so by physical circumstances—and, even then, only after Gertrude, his mother, is dead.”3 According to Jones, Hamlet’s attitude toward Claudius is due to, “the apparent hatred of Gertrude’s relationship with Claudius, especially his obsession with their intimacy.” Finally, Jones argued that Hamlet’s dismissive attitude of Ophelia is also due to oedipal feelings: “The total reaction culminates in the bitter misogyny of his outburst against Ophelia, who is devastated at having to bear a reaction so wholly out of proportion to her own offense and has no idea that in reviling her Hamlet is really expressing his bitter resentment against his mother.”4

Such an application of the oedipal complex to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was so compelling that Jones was approached about collaborating with Laurence Olivier on a motion picture, almost immediately after publication. While there are hundreds of cinematic versions of *Hamlet* today, Olivier’s *Hamlet* still stands out as an original work that had lasting influence on this play.

3 Guerin et al., *Handbook*, 162.

Olivier’s Hamlet is one of the oldest and most direct interpretations of the Oedipus Complex. It received such a favorable reaction that Olivier won an Academy for Best Picture and Best Actor; quite impressive, considering the limited technology Olivier was working with and the conservative views of a 1950’s audience. In later interpretations of Hamlet’s oedipal desires, Hamlet seems to be unaware of his “repressed” desires, but Olivier portrays a Hamlet that is not only aware of his attraction but expresses it both verbally and through body language. Early in the play, Hamlet and Gertrude display an affectionate relationship in Act 1, scene 2. Gertrude asks Hamlet to stay: “Go not to Wittenberg” (1.2.23). Hamlet looks upon Gertrude, obviously glancing down at her breasts before replying, “I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (1.2.24). Claudius delights at Hamlet’s compliance, turning away to address his subjects, and Gertrude kisses Hamlet in parting. They kiss at least four full seconds (06:17); so long in fact that King Claudius appears uncomfortable and interrupts them with, “Madam, come” (1.2.26) as he reclaims his distracted bride.

Later, in the infamous bedroom scene, Hamlet expresses his wishes to be with his mother, masked by seeking revenge for his father. In a calm, but determined tone, Hamlet says, “You are the Queen, your
husband’s brother’s wife / And (would it were not so) you are my mother” (3.4.20-21). With a psychoanalytic lens, this line can have a completely different meaning than the reprimand and insult the audience is familiar with. If Olivier’s Hamlet has acknowledged and is aware of his incestuous desire, then this line could also express Hamlet’s regret that Gertrude is his kin, instead of his wife. Upset by Gertrude’s dismissive reply, Hamlet forcefully throws Gertrude to her bed and insists she not move. He says, “You go not till I set you up a glass [mirror] / Where you may see the (inmost) part of you” (3.4.24-25). Again—under the premise of blaming his mother for infidelity and murder—Hamlet expresses his hope (quite forcefully) that she will realize and return his affections, or the “inmost” part of Hamlet. In addition, Hamlet exposes his jealousy as he urges his mother to refrain from sleeping with the King (his uncle and step-father) that night. Hamlet says “But, go not to my uncle’s bed. / Assume virtue if you have it not” (3.4.80-81). Hamlet’s gentle tone and affectionate manner (1:36:50) reveal his possible embarrassment of requesting this of her. Finally, after all is said and done, Hamlet asks his mother to keep these affairs secret, to not tell Claudius, which is proof of his insecurities and self-doubt. Gertrude promises to not tell the King about what has happened or about Hamlet’s strange behavior, and they depart in another long kiss.

In the scene just described (Act 3 scene 4), Hamlet displays typical symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder. When Gertrude responds to Hamlet killing Polonius with, “What bloody deed is this!” (3.4.33), he responds defensively, almost immediately deflecting blame to Gertrude: “Almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother” (3.4.34-35). Indeed, the speed with which he kills Polonius (without even knowing his identity), his forcefulness with Gertrude, and his refusal to acknowledge blame, show extreme rage and denial, both symptoms of narcissism. In “Olivier, Hamlet, and Freud,” Peter Donaldson explains:

Olivier’s Hamlet is a character of a markedly narcissistic cast, in whose makeup isolation, depression, rage, and fantasies of uniqueness and omnipotence play their part. Recent psychoanalytic literature is particularly
rich in its treatment of narcissism, and of the ways in which oedipal conflict can screen or mask deeper issues concerning the coherence or worth of the self, and this aspect of the film may therefore be more accessible now than in 1947.\(^5\)

According to Donaldson, Hamlet’s oedipal affections sometimes “mask” other neurotic behaviors that have stemmed from Hamlet’s insecurities (or “worth of self”). As the field of psychology develops, we are given the language and knowledge to look beyond Freud’s original ideas and to express such traits in Hamlet. However, these traits can change with varying interpretations.

**1990 Hamlet- Directed by Franco Zeffirelli**

**Starring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close**

The Franco Zeffirelli version of Hamlet takes a more modern and “physical”\(^6\) approach to the same bedroom scene, viewed earlier (Act 3 Scene 4), by employing sarcastic tones, teasing, anger, yelling, and physical altercation (with the help of Hamlet’s sword). In the first few moments of the scene Hamlet enters the room, swinging his sword playfully and looking around—almost begging his mother to challenge him (1:17:22), before asking Gertrude (who is obviously upset), “Now, mother, what’s the matter?” (3.4.11). Mel Gibson, who plays Hamlet, masters the persona of an annoyed and distraught teenager, with aggressive glances that challenge Gertrude’s Matronly authority. Gertrude (played by Glenn Close) tries to have a serious conversation but is frustrated when Hamlet will not give her a direct answer. She asks “Have you forgot me?” (3.4.18) and Gibson’s Hamlet replies with a very sarcastic tone, “No, by the rood, not so. / You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife.” Here, Hamlet’s tone switches from sarcastic to angry, as he turns the conversation into an accusation of his mother’s fidelity and angrily insults Gertrude by saying, “And (would it were not so) you are my mother” (3.4.21). Gertrude—who has had enough—slaps Hamlet across the face and walks away to leave, but Hamlet stops with a

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\(^6\) Ebert, “Hamlet Movie Review.”
booming, animalistic roar (1:18:02). It is almost as if he—through the roar—transforms into a dangerous monster.

Gibson’s Hamlet displays some aspects of narcissistic personality disorder, but over all seems very normal and grounded until the slap, when he suddenly flips from an arrogant joker to a menacing threat. Hamlet detains his mother with the use of his sword, poking her back towards her bed until she cries “Help,” and Polonius stirs. Hamlet, hearing someone else near, turns and immediately stabs the unknown person through the curtain with his sword. It is here, and his use of the word “dead” (3.4.29) that reveals Hamlet’s deteriorating mental state. Upon stabbing and killing a person, Hamlet turns around and poses grandly—almost jokingly—at his defeat, while Gertrude screams, horrified (1:18:28). The phrase “dead” becomes a sort of “ta-da” moment that shows his disregard for life. The fact that Gibson’s Hamlet can react so rashly and comically in the murder of an unknown person shows more than oedipal jealousy or narcissism: it shows a deeply disturbed psyche, and it only escalates from here.

In an analysis of Zeffirelli’s Hamlet that shifts Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytic “Male Gaze” to “Homosexual Gaze,” William Van Watson explains the symbolic nature of Hamlet’s sword (that draws on Lacanian principles of psychoanalysis). According to Van Wat-

son, the sword is a phallic symbol as well as a crucifix (both in shape and meaning) that Hamlet is tied to throughout the film. This adds an element of what Ernest Jones calls, “true symbolism,” to the bedroom scene that is very telling. Jones differentiated “true symbolism” from normal notions of symbolism as those symbols that reflect repressed desires: “Only what is repressed is symbolized; only what is repressed needs to be symbolized.” In this light, Hamlet’s swinging of his sword and little jabs at Gertrude, show his repressed intent to dominate her or at least take his father’s place in her life. Van Watson further observes that, “Zeffirelli’s camera continually prioritizes the sword as enforcer of ‘the Law of the Father’ [a Lacanian theory concerning a father’s role] throughout the film.” Interestingly, Hamlet keeps his sword close to him the entire scene, even after killing Polonius, until he sees that Gertrude is ready to run away in fear. He slowly puts down the sword, seeming to surrender as he raises both empty hands, before again turning hostile and chasing Gertrude to her bed (1:19:28), essentially surrendering to his repressed desires.

This bedroom scene is filled with symbolism and cognitive dissonance, in Hamlet’s behavior, that audiences are intrigued by, but

9 Jones, Papers, 116.
for those unfamiliar with a psychoanalytic reading of this play, a passionate kiss is the last thing expected. Movie critic Hal Hinson, says of this moment:

he pounces on his mother (Glenn Close) in her bed after he’s stabbed Polonius . . . there’s such naked sexual aggression in the attack -- and it’s met with such open passion from Close’s Gertrude -- that for an instant the relationship seems laden with heretofore undreamed-of possibilities. It’s a stirring, audacious confrontation.¹¹

I agree that this bedroom scene is “audacious,” but for different reasons than Hinson. For me, this scene is bold because it is unexpected: Hamlet is unhinged and Gertrude is terrified, and up until this point in the movie, the mother and son had not previously expressed hints of romantic affection towards one another. Van Watson says, “This impassioned confrontation culminates in an explicitly sexual mouth-to-mouth kiss between the two, which only the oedipal apparition of the elder Hamlet’s ghost brings to an end.”¹² Hinson is right, this scene is powerful and shocking. But for me, the most effective aspect is the obvious guilt invoked by the presence of the Ghost.

In the middle of their incestuous and passion-filled kiss, Hamlet’s

¹¹ Hinson, “Hamlet.”

eyes open wide, in horror, noticing his Ghost father witnessing the horrific scene.

In comparison, Olivier’s version hints at the complicated mother-son relationship early on and many scenes seem to be motivated by oedipal desire, but in Zeffirelli’s version, this scene catches the audience off-guard, just as it catches Hamlet off guard. This is not necessarily a problem with a psychoanalytic reading. In fact, in Jone’s original analysis of this play, the fact that Hamlet and Shakespeare were unaware of oedipal intent is addressed. Jones says:

the hearer himself does not know the inner cause of the conflict in his mind, but experiences only the outer manifestations of it. We thus reach the apparent paradox that the hero [Hamlet], the poet [Shakespeare], and the audience are all profoundly moved by feelings due to a conflict of the source of which they are unaware.13

Interestingly, many of the same lines performed by both casts offer varying interpretations, even though both are approaching Hamlet with the same psychological lens. This, in part, comes from the intent of directors but is influenced by current psychological views and the changing nature of psychoanalysis. Notice how newer productions of Hamlet are shifting from obvious physical displays of oedipal desire, or symbols of repressed desire, to more complicated depictions of Hamlet’s psyche. An excellent example is Robert Icke’s recent production of Hamlet (2018).

2018 Hamlet, Directed by Robert Icke
Starring Andrew Scott and Juliet Stevenson

In contrast to the first two examples of the portrayal of Hamlet, Robert Icke’s Hamlet played by Andrew Scott walks a line between concern, anger, and desire for his mother. Juliet Stevenson’s Gertrude adds complexity to Gertrude that we do not often see; she expresses her pain and confusion about Hamlet’s behavior through her

tears, hugs, meaningful glances, and even kisses on Hamlet’s cheek, which can be hard to gauge at times. But, when Hamlet crosses the line of appropriate familial affection, Gertrude immediately rejects it. And yet, while doing all of this, Stevenson still manages to display the selfless love of a mother, who is concerned for her son. I particularly appreciate that Icke’s production references oedipal desire in a toned-down, version.

Theatre critic and author, Ian Shuttlerworth, points out that Scott’s Hamlet delivers “every word [as] a separate question,” giving the famous lines new meaning and a sense that Hamlet is questioning himself as well as others, almost constantly. Simply put, Scott understands the mannerisms of a psychologically unwell person. His varied facial expressions, wide and expressive eyes, and ability to cry upon a moment’s notice, and then, suddenly seem fine the next, convince the audience of his real struggle for truth and peace. And in turn, we believe him, as does Gertrude, when he says, “That I am essentially, not in madness, but mad in craft” (2:05:30). Scott delivers these revered lines in a way that stands out from every previous Hamlet—not an easy thing to do. Overall, reviewer Sarah Hemming, encapsulates Scott’s performance well with, “a Hamlet who draws us with him along this painful edge between being and not being.” And I would add who walks the border of romantic and
familial love for his mother. This is what a psychological reading of Hamlet can present to twenty-first century viewers but let us not forget the updated gender roles of Gertrude, from Olivier to Icke.

Each production mentioned in this paper is reflective of society’s perception of women when it was made (Herlie—late 1948, Close—1990, and Stevenson—2018). In both Zeffirelli and Icke’s production, weapons (sword and gun) are needed to intimidate and control Gertrude, whereas Olivier’s Gertrude (Eileen Herlie) needs little more inducement than a scolding to obey.

In contrast, both Juliet Stevenson and Glenn Close portray a strong Gertrude, who does not easily give in to Hamlet’s outbursts and bullying. In Olivier’s production, Gertrude constantly seeks Hamlet’s attention and often initiates inappropriate kisses, for a mother. This is somewhat true for Zeffirelli’s version, but less so. However, Stevenson’s Gertrude never initiates a suggestive kiss with Hamlet. She is the only actress that is really old enough to play Hamlet’s mother (there are twenty years between Stevenson and Scott) and is actually eleven years younger than Olivier. Although actors can play ages different from their own, it does put into question the validity of an oedipal interpretation. Thankfully, modern Shakespearian productions, theatre, and film are all slowly adapting to more re-
alistic expectations for women (and men) actors and roles, including older ages for leading ladies, different body types, racially diverse, and cross-gender casting. The future of Shakespeare is bright, with the rich history it provides and the new opportunities available to modernize plays.

The conclusion then, is that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* will always be a play that addresses psychology (in some form) because, at the end of the day, *Hamlet* is about a boy with a “tortured conscience.”\textsuperscript{14} Audiences have viewed countless interpretations of how his “tortured conscience” is manifest, and the history of *Hamlet* and psychoanalysis is just one compelling version that has lasted because of the work of Freud, Jones, and Olivier. Like Wilfred L. Guerin and his colleagues, I believe “psychoanalysis is a valuable tool in understanding not only literature but human nature.”\textsuperscript{15} Does that mean modern adaptations should always address the Oedipus Complex? Heavens, no! *Hamlet* is an opportunity for directors to address the imperfections of the human mind, and as long as they do that—in some form or fashion—audiences will continue to be drawn to this play.

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\textsuperscript{14} Jones, “Œdipus-Complex,” 89.

\textsuperscript{15} Handbook, 180.
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Image of the first folio edition of Hamlet
Brandeis University.