

## Adolescence as represented in *Hamlet*

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Internal objects enable the analyst to “seem to perform functions” for the patient (Donald Meltzer)

I have been asked me to talk about adolescence in *Hamlet* bearing in mind Meltzer’s account of the interdigitating different ‘worlds of the adolescent’ (‘The psychopathology of adolescence’, in Meltzer & Harris, 2011).

*Hamlet* is a pivotal play in Shakespeare’s career. In it he reviews and revises his idea of the playwright’s countertransference relationship to his adolescent “hero”. It is not just a case of the qualities of the hero as a character – the “sweet prince of Denmark” – but of the structural role of the hero in the play as a whole. The hero has his dreams, and the play consists of one dream after another; but also the playwright has his dream which is the play itself. The play is unrealistically long owing to Shakespeare’s struggle with evolving a new form, a new type of play – the dream-play. So when we look at the group of adolescents in *Hamlet*, and especially at Hamlet himself, we need to constantly be aware of the tension between the protagonist and the dramatist, and how it prefigures the psychoanalytic situation of transference and countertransference.

Hamlet as a character is certainly the prototype for “the adolescent” for centuries to come. His “madness” is adolescent angst - not exactly standard since owing to his genuine “princely” qualities he experiences its turbulence in a particularly rich and pronounced form, as in the poetry of his speeches and the passion of his views on reforming the world. All the same this makes him an ideal vehicle for the clear representation of adolescent struggles and instability. We see him in all the relevant contexts – as a child in the family, as a rebellious adolescent, as a member of an adolescent gang, and also, in isolation from his group. We get vivid pictures of Hamlet at various stages of his life: the pre-latency child riding on his father’s shoulders (as in Yorick the jester in the Graveyard scene); as his mother’s favourite, rolled up in her skirts (as in the play and the closet scene); as the schoolboy at “Wittenberg” playing wordgames of bawdy sexual innuendo with his peers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (which he calls “playing on a pipe”), or playing sporty homosexual games with Laertes (in the duel). We see his attempt to move from this schoolboy world into heterosexual intimacy with Laertes’ sister, Ophelia. In terms of taking part in the adult world we see his awkward demeanour in public and, on the intimate side, identification with one particular teacher, Polonius, and their passionate interests in common, epitomised by the production of plays. We see his doubts about his parents’ creativity – to the extent he feels they cannot be his real

parents – and his conviction of universal adult hypocrisy in a world where no person seems concerned with the difference between “is and seems”.

In thematic terms, we see the oscillation between the thirst for knowledge and the cynicism of omnipotence; between wonder at the beauty of the world and disgust at the sexuality which is everywhere present in it: “what a piece of work is a man – in apprehension like the angels...” etc, yet “what is this quintessence of dust”? We see the struggle between the dreamer in Hamlet (what Meltzer calls “going backwards” to childhood dependency on objects – a prince of contemplation) and the other type of prince, the prince of action, who ruthlessly seeks – and gets – worldly success, just as Hamlet succumbs to “being Fortinbras” by the end of the play. We see the impact of femininity and the feminine world which appears to him as the aesthetic object, and the confusion and ambivalence this arouses: this is shown in the struggle between intrusive and communicative forms of identification not only in his relationships with Ophelia and his mother, but also, in his directorial attitude to the feminine world of the players, which he usurps in omnipotent princely fashion. Here he acts just like the primitive conqueror he despises in the form of the Norwegian prince, or like the intruder into the mother-world of knowledge that he despises in the form of Polonius. In other words, he is full of contradictions.

Hamlet sways between identifying with the intrusive curiosity that his move out of latency has stimulated in his teacher Polonius, and the passive receptive dependence that matches the function of his analyst Horatio. He sways between thoughtfulness and grandiosity. He seeks containment in his adolescent group and in his potential partner Ophelia, yet his hypersensitive suspicion and distrust finds itself confirmed in their responses. His quickness is a personal disadvantage, for he has outgrown their reciprocity before they have adjusted to his latest phase. Ophelia and Laertes are also adolescents and become victims of Hamlet’s haste and egocentricity; he drives Laertes to action, whereas Ophelia is moved into another direction, away from Hamlet and into womanhood – which appears to Hamlet another kind of madness.

In all these groupings and confusion of directions, the problem of sexuality is central. Indeed as Meltzer says, “all work is sexual in its meaning”; and in the world of the adolescent this is particularly crucial, since Don says the adolescent needs his sexual relationships and phantasies in order to sort out his confusions about knowledge and identity. For this reason both moral disapproval and liberal laissez-faire are inappropriate attitudes – they are forms of action or acting-out in response to the adolescent’s provocativeness, as epitomised by Hamlet’s “mousetrap” intended to ridicule his parents’ love-making. He has discovered – in Meltzer’s formula – that his parents may have sex – a kind of bestial sport, “stewing in the nasty sty” - but are not thereby creative in spirit and indeed, he doubts they really ever engendered him – something borne out in terms of feeling in the play by the fact that he appears far more intelligent than Claudius or Gertrude.

Instead of action, aroused by such types of provocation, what is needed on the part of the adults is understanding and a capacity to allow the adolescent to distance himself

when it gets too painful. This mis-match between Hamlet and the adult world around him is particularly vividly evoked in Shakespeare's play – where as Hamlet says, his former friends and teachers all seek to “pluck out the heart of his mystery” and keep his “madness” confined within limits, whilst at the same time all their actions inflame his distress. He cannot walk in the “lobby of dreams” alone, without being spied upon with a view to diagnosing his mental disease and discomfort.

And in particular we see the rocking backwards and forwards of the adolescent between the various worlds, which is epitomised in the evocative speech “To be or not to be” [which I hope we will have time to look at a little more closely].

These pictures of Hamlet's multiple worlds and unstable aspects of identity are not presented to us chronologically, because *Hamlet* is a dreamplay, so they appear as they would in dreams – according to the particular emotional problem that is being tackled by each dream-symbol in turn. I will give a brief sketch of the story of the play, not in terms of its plot, but in terms of its dreams – these being at the core of Hamlet's not entirely successful search for the “undiscovered country” of his future self, the new shape of his mind as it might be after the catastrophic change of adolescence.

What is particularly important to the structure of the play is the role of Horatio, who has little to say yet maintains a presence at all the significant points. Hamlet describes him as the ideal observer – as “one who in suffering all, suffers nothing”. He allows the characters to dream and notes down what he sees. Like the playwright himself, he is intimately identified with, and yet distanced from, their emotional trials. His job is to weave them together into a meaningful symbol, and this, as Hamlet sees, is a type of “suffering” also.

### **The Ghost dream**

The Ghost makes clear Hamlet's claustrophobic state and near-schizophrenic delusion that his father is his uncle. This dream of his father-uncle (rather than his “uncle-father” as he calls Claudius) who is lost in a kind of hellish limbo, demonstrates his ambivalence to his internal father. A childhood idealisation of a godlike and heroic figure who could defend his country by means of single-handed duels, has switched to his current disillusion with Claudius' middle-aged decay, depression, over-indulgence in sensual pleasures etc. The two images compare as “Hyperion to a satyr” in his mind. It becomes clear that this ambivalence is rooted in his distrust of hidden, invisible feminine treachery and false “beautified” appearances in his mother and Ophelia. The Ghost claims the milky food of his mind has been poisoned by treachery (I.v.45-85) and incites Hamlet to revenge, whilst at the same time warning him not to “taint his mind or harm his mother” (I.v.85).

These are contradictory demands of his internal object, and Hamlet reacts ambiguously: he is prompted to act out his vengeance, and at the same time to seek a receiver for his dreams – as is suggested by wanting to ‘write down’ his feelings. As Meltzer

says of the adolescent, he is stimulated to go forwards and backwards at the same time. The “antic disposition” which he then adopts – his “madness” - becomes both a cover for the verbal acting-out that follows, and his aesthetic self-expression. Polonius points this out when he admiringly says that madness is often nearer the truth than sanity.

It is also noteworthy how Horatio, Hamlet’s “observer”, is involved on the fringes of the Ghost sequences. He comes into view as a supporter and a containing influence who has more perception than the others of Hamlet’s internal state. In fact he is the first to see the Ghost, and brings him to Hamlet’s attention. To other characters, the Ghost is invisible; and indeed will only speak to Hamlet, even though Horatio is termed a “scholar” – someone who knows about how to speak to ghosts – about which there were definite opinions in Shakespeare’s day, just as there are today amongst psychoanalysts, and speaking to ghosts was considered quite a science.

### **The madman dream**

Hamlet feels the Ghost has projected its madness into him and this exacerbates his intrusive intentions towards Ophelia. Hence his next dream conveys his appearance in her “closet” or private room, half undressed like a traditional caricature of a madman, looking as if he had just been released from hell “to speak of horrors”. This is in response to Polonius’ interference with their relationship – Polonius having told Ophelia to deny Hamlet access to her because his motivation was bound to be dishonourable. Then her obedience is taken by Hamlet as a masochistic passivity – this is how he “draws her face” in his mind, his interpretation. He has been easily led into a false transference, and reacts automatically by means of intrusive access to her “closet” (whether this represents her body or her mental ambience). The spirit of vengeance is inextricable from a false aesthetics. This episode is a prelude to the later similar scene in which Hamlet tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery to conceal the falseness of her beauty.

It is important to remember that Polonius is a great admirer of Hamlet and in a sense yet another father – the one who has nurtured his intellect and his passionate interests such as philosophy and theatre. He is not to be dismissed as only a senile old fool who talks too much. His advice is good and his identification with Hamlet more perspicuous than that of the other adults. Yet his methods of psychic investigation are all wrong – they are anti-aesthetic, and stimulate to action rather than to contemplation. He tries to “spy out where truth is hid”, treating Hamlet’s inner mystery as if it were a riddle to be solved. He is oblivious to the fact that the means are essential to the end – and as Bion points out, those who disregard the means are on a path to the Sirens and will end up with nothing but a pile of old bones.

Although Hamlet is traditionally a play in which the hero thinks too much and cannot act, in fact the opposite is the case. Hamlet’s danger is in thinking too little and acting too precipitously – it just happens that because of his verbal virtuosity, his actions often take the form of words, speeches and cutting remarks.

## The Mousetrap dream

This dream lies at the heart of the play – literally, for in Shakespeare such a play-within-a-play is generally either a caricature or a simple yet true symbol of the larger play's significance.

Between the Madman or closet dream, and the Mousetrap, is the encounter with Ophelia which represents the most delicate balance in the play between development and revenge. The encounter is prefaced by Hamlet's famous soul-searching soliloquy, "To be or not to be" (which I hope we can read in more detail at the end), in which he considers the possibility that his mind is an "undiscovered country" full of unknown, nascent dreams, and his urge to act out his revenge becomes temporarily halted. His "will" is "puzzled" and he is held in a state of contemplation. However, by mischance – or psychic inevitability – this temporary state is intruded on not by Polonius but by Ophelia as her father's agent. She has been sent to give him back the gifts or (in a less concrete sense) "remembrances" that Hamlet has previously given her in their courtship. Hamlet has that very moment asked her to "remember his sins" in her prayers; yet instead, she appears to throw them back in his face. The humiliation is too great and he retaliates with verbal action in "Get thee to a nunnery" and the accusation that all women are painted whores etc.

The Mousetrap dream like the closet dream is founded on intrusive projective identification. It represents Hamlet's attempt to express his poisoned vision of the primal scene – to Ophelia, his parents, and Horatio. It is his revenge on the Polonius-father who is spying on his own internal world, in a way that has been sanctioned by the king, his governing father-figure.

Hamlet's agents in this piece of acting-out are the professional actors, and he treats them very much in the way that Polonius treats Ophelia. The Players are all male (including the boy who plays the female lead), yet together as a troupe they are associated with femininity, owing to their artistic function of capturing emotionality. Immediately Hamlet hijacks them and their play, and (being the prince) he can insist that they become agents in the enactment of his own phantasy. They politely endure his directorial harassment, when he lectures them on the art of acting - "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" etc (III.ii.20). Then he inserts himself into the inner sanctum of the play in the figure of 'nephew to the king' in order to portray to his parents the pornographic nature of their lovemaking. Meanwhile, as the play is being performed, he inserts himself into Ophelia's "lap" (his head on her lap) with bawdy innuendo, to "see the puppets playing'. He calls this 'interpreting between you and your love', a form of false communication, analogous to a failed analytic countertransference. She rebukes him with a certain sense of humour for being "as good as a chorus".

The Mousetrap brings to the fore the aesthetic nature of the art of acting, and how it can be abused – by the actors, or the playwright, or indeed the audience, and turn into a travesty of itself, an instrument for propaganda rather than for emotional containment. Hamlet insists Horatio must watch his play. And just before the play begins, he declares

how he trusts Horatio over and above all others, for he alone seems immune to the corruption that infects not just the adult world but also the adolescent one, in which supposed friends turn out to be traitors on the side of the king. Hamlet says:

Give me that man that is not passion's slave  
And I will wear him in my heart of hearts,  
As I do thee.

It is a moving passage, a moment of quiet in the midst of mania, the nearest Hamlet comes to expressing love; yet there is a touch of condescension in it. His praise deskills Horatio, elevating him to an apparently intimate position, yet really in a useless capacity. From this point, we can sense Horatio's influence ebbing away him, and also Shakespeare's interest in Hamlet as a hero. At the end of the play when Hamlet has managed to create total confusion and the rest of the court have been swept off the stage, he triumphantly sings a silly, dirty song to Horatio, and Horatio replies moralistically: "You might have rhymed". His urge to correct just feeds into Hamlet's reforming zeal, and Horatio is powerless to prevent Hamlet's violence towards his mother in the scene which follows, re-enacting with renewed force the earlier and more tentative closet scene with Ophelia.

This is the scene in which Polonius is killed. Hamlet thinks he has impaled the King, as if in the midst of the sexual act, but when he discovers it is actually Polonius the murder takes on the significance of being the queen's baby – hiding in her "arras". In previous scenes Hamlet had compared Polonius to a baby. In the middle of all this the Ghost appears again, not in armour but in soft bedroom clothes, and once more we see Hamlet rocking back and forth for a few moments between repentance and regression. His statement "I do repent" lacks emotionality and there is none of the poetic aura that surrounds "To be or not to be".

The second half of the play is written under a different aegis. Shakespeare abandons all realism of plot and all attempts to fit the play within normal play-time. The feminine aspect of the countertransference (associated with Horatio) captures Shakespeare's interest in this half of the play. It is governed by the imagery of flowers and water, contrasting with the imagery of sickness and decay that governed the first part. It begins with Ophelia and her madness – for now it is her turn to use madness as self-expression. Meanwhile Hamlet is sent away to "England" (by Shakespeare, as well as Claudius) so she can become the focus without interference.

### **The dream of Ophelia's madness**

The dream of Ophelia's madness is really a dream that Horatio has on behalf of Hamlet. The King appoints him to 'watch' Ophelia – to become her special observer. In literal terms of the plot, Horatio makes a very bad guard, since Ophelia then goes and drowns herself - and not only this, but she appears to have done it in full view of the Queen.

At least, this is what the vividness of the Queen's narrative of the drowning appears to evoke. All this goes to emphasize the extent to which Hamlet has become a dream play, not an ordinary revenge tragedy. In this section the women come to the fore and express their feelings in a different kind of symbolic language.

With Ophelia's mad songs, music enters in to the play, having been notably absent (for Shakespeare) till that point. The concept of femininity does in a sense recover from the degradation of the 'poisoned milk' 'rotting weed' and 'stewing pigsty' emotional context in which it was originally embedded. In the Mousetrap scene Ophelia had said to Hamlet, 'I think nothing', meaning, she did not want to collude in his dirty thoughts, contain his 'sins'. Now in the Mad Scene she introjects something of his madness but she reshapes it, figuring her condition of pregnancy, just as Polonius thought Hamlet's madness was "pregnant" in intellect. Ophelia's speech is described as 'nothing' and 'unshaped' yet it has an impact on those around her. Like the players, her language makes her listeners 'collect' their feelings and match her words 'to their own thoughts' in the archetypal manner of art (V.v.6-12). She becomes the artist or player-queen not through face-painting and deception, as Hamlet accused her, but through poetic and musical speech. There is a sense in which all poetry seems nonsense, yet it speaks through its music and, as Bion says, it has "durability" even though nobody can say exactly what it means.

Ophelia seemed retiring and over-obedient at first, as though still stuck in latency. Yet when pushed to the point she shows she has more resilience in a sexual relationship than either Hamlet or Laertes. Her implied pregnancy – implied by the poetic imagery of flowers and water – represents her flowering as an individual in a kind of quiet rebellion that distances her from the rotting values of the adult world (the court). Meanwhile Horatio has remained with the family, watching what is going on, and this watching is his countertransference dream.

### **The Grave dream**

Hamlet, however, has followed a different path. It is the one represented by his dream of Fortinbras (strong-arms), the primitive military adventurer who is not even seen actually fighting but merely leading thousands of men to their doom for a piece of land "not worth an eggshell". This is what Don calls the ruthless thrust for success that some adolescents retreat into when the dreaminess becomes too painful and makes them feel too helpless. It is really an extended latency and it only shows symptomatically later – from about age 30 – when they become "neurotic".

Hamlet is age 30 when he reappears, having come back from his voyage to England via the "pirate ship" – that is, having made his mark and asserted his independence – he comes back to claim his inheritance: "It is I, Hamlet the Dane" he announces to his hated father-figure. He appears cured of his madness, as they said he would be if he made this journey. Nonetheless the dream of the Gravedigger shakes his equanimity and shows

him the ruin of his childlike and his feminine side – the child in the picture of riding on Yorick’s back, and now all that remains is an empty skull, like an empty stage, where once there was a face and lips: “Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft”. The skull turns into “my lady’s chamber” – the feminine space – and revolts him – “how abhorred it is”. He has got into a repetition mode and advanced no further than in the Nunnery scene years before.

Horatio tries to stop Hamlet’s phantasy going entirely down the anal route – to Alexander’s “bung-hole” – but his efforts are aborted by the next dream, the one of Ophelia’s burial, which is in a sense also the grave of Hamlet’s hopes of being a “sweet prince” in his adulthood as he was in his childhood. His feminine side is buried and his Fortinbras-side takes over the kingdom of his mind.

Hamlet himself recovers his inner poetry in his final words, in which he hands his story over to Horatio:

Absent thee from felicity a while,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story.

Only Horatio is left to try to make sense of Hamlet’s story. It was not Hamlet the character who was so important after all, but Hamlet the play. The life and soul of the play – its inner music or “basic, fundamental reality” as Bion would say – moved from Hamlet the character over to Ophelia, the heroine of adolescence, and then finally into Horatio the counter-dreamer, like the playwright. The characters were all dreamers in their way, and as Don says, “The thinker is the dreamer and the analyst the comprehender of his thought”. In order to follow the method properly and not fall into mistakes of acting-out the countertransference, the analyst must be “in love with” the method, no less. At the end of Hamlet, Shakespeare realises that like the analyst, his role is not to be in love with any particular character, but with the method – the method of writing plays. It was the end of one adolescent dream and the beginning of an adult one. From now on he would not try to construct a hero from qualities that he personally admired, but simply follow the dreams presented to him by the entire cast of characters whom he would observe with evenly-suspended attention.

## References

**Meltzer, Donald.** The psychopathology of adolescence. In *Adolescence: talks and papers* by Donald Meltzer and Martha Harris, ed. Meg Harris Williams. (This paper was originally published in Italian in *Quaderni di Psicoterapia Infantile* no. 1; Rome: Borla.) Harris Meltzer Trust, 2011.

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