



# The Tragedy of Hoemdiplot: Freud's Fusion of Oedipus and Hamlet<sup>1</sup>

A Tragédia de Hamlédipo: a fusão entre Édipo e Hamlet por Freud

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**ABSTRACT:** Very early on, Freud centered his argument for the universality of the Oedipus complex on a reading of Oedipus tyrannus. But why did he insist on reading it specifically as a theatrical experience on the part of a modern audience? This article argues that Freud's theory from the start had fused the Sophoclean play with Shakespeare's Hamlet, deploying Oedipus tyrannus metatheatrically as Hamlet deployed "The Murder of Gonzago" to trigger a reaction in Claudius. Freud puts us in the audience of Oedipus in order for us to sense our own oedipal guilt, confirming his theory.

**KEYWORDS:** Sigmund Freud; Oedipus Complex; Sophocles; Hamlet; Shakespeare; *Oedipus Tyrannus*; Oedipus the King; Jean Mounet-Sully; Adolf Wilbrandt; *The Interpretation of Dreams*

**RESUMO:** Desde suas primeiras elaborações, o argumento de Freud em prol da universalidade do complexo de Édipo esteve centrado numa leitura de *Édipo Rei*. Mas por que Freud insiste em ler essa peça especificamente como uma experiência teatral por parte de uma audiência moderna? Este artigo defende que a teoria de Freud, desde o princípio, fundiu a peça sofocliana ao *Hamlet* de Shakespeare, fazendo um uso metateatral de *Édipo Rei* equivalente ao que faz Hamlet com "O Assassinato de Gonzago", para provocar uma reação em Cláudio. Freud nos coloca na audiência de *Édipo* para que sejamos tomados por nossa culpa edipiana, confirmando assim sua teoria.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Sigmund Freud; Complexo de Édipo; Sófocles; Hamlet; Shakespeare; *Oedipus Tyrannus*; Édipo Rei; Jean Mounet-Sully; Adolf Wilbrandt; *A Interpretação dos Sonhos*

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## The Riddle of Oedipus

You really can't think of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century reception of Oedipus without thinking about Freud – even if only unconsciously. The figure of Oedipus is literally emblematic of early psychoanalysis. An engraving of Ingres' *Oedipus and the Sphinx* hung over the famous couch at Berggasse 19; a similar image served as Freud's bookplate, and later the logo for the International Psychoanalytic Press in Vienna. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud went so far as to liken Oedipus' process of self-discovery in the Sophoclean play to "the work of a psychoanalysis" (SE 4: 262). At the heart of this emblematic status is of course the Oedipus complex, a "shibboleth" of orthodox psychoanalysis as he called it. By the time Freud wrote *Totem and taboo* in 1912–13, the Oedipal saga became transformed into what he later termed a "scientific myth" about the primal father, his murder at the hands of his sons, and the origins of exogamy, culture, religion and society as consequences of that dire deed. Freud's interest in Oedipus certainly has the contours of a gripping monomania. But what is the genesis of this very specific attachment to the King of Thebes?

This is a question I began to ask many years ago, when I first noticed that his focus on Oedipus is very much shaped as a theatrical experience. That is, when Freud theorizes the Oedipus complex, he thinks very concretely of the *modern* audience seeing the Sophoclean play in performance. This detail is very important, and it is also consistent in how he talks about the text over some period of time. See for example the first mention of his theory, in a private letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess of October 15, 1897.

...die griechische Sage greift einen Zwang auf, den jeder anerkennt, weil er dessen Existenz in sich verspürt hat. *Jeder der Hörer* war einmal im Keime und in der Phantasie ein solcher Ödipus, und vor der hier in die Realität gezogenen Traumerfüllung schaudert jeder zurück mit dem ganzen Betrag der Verdrängung, der seinen infantilen Zustand von seinem heutigen trennt. (Masson, 1986, p. 293).

...the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. *Everyone in the audience* was once a bidding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one. (Masson, 1985, p. 272, my emphasis).

Note how Freud doesn't refer to a reader, but literally a listener (*Hörer*), or rather *jeder der Hörer*, or "each one of the listeners," i.e. the *audience*. Moreover, he refers specifically to a *modern* audience, in order to create a riddle out of the play; namely, how can an ancient tragedy that seems to be about such foreign ideas as fate and the omnipotence of the gods move a *modern* audience at all? He contrasts this theatrical success to modern attempts to create a tragedy of fate (*Schicksalstragödie*), and declares these later works dismal failures with the audience because they are not built on the same psychic material. It's also important to note that Freud always refers to the play by the German title *König Ödipus*, not *Oedipus rex* as translated in the Standard Edition; the German title is completely domesticated, as with a contemporary performance text. It was always staged in Austria and Germany as *König Ödipus*, not *Oedipus rex*.

Two questions arise from this, which I first tried to answer years ago. First there is the *historical* question of just which productions might lie behind his assumption that a modern audience reacts this way. Second, there is the *theoretical* question, why insist so strongly and specifically on the Sophoclean work as a theatrical experience? Now, I'll admit that years ago, I naïvely thought I'd found an answer concerning the genesis of Freud's obsession. The 1880s and 1890s were indeed an Age of Oedipus on the stages of Paris and Vienna, the two cities most important to Freud's personal experience as he gestated psychoanalysis. The great French actor Jean Mounet-Sully had made the play a star vehicle at the Comédie Française beginning in the 1880s, and he became the definitive Oedipus of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Vienna, the director Adolf Wilbrandt realized a life-long ambition to stage this and other Greek tragedies when he became the director of the Hofburgtheater, the Imperial Court Theater of Vienna and the pre-eminent stage in the German-speaking world. So initially I felt we had a tidy little connection to make: Freud was, as his biographer Ernest Jones even said, greatly impressed by Mounet-Sully as a medical student in Paris when he saw the French actor as Oedipus. When he returned home shortly thereafter to Vienna, Wilbrandt's *König Ödipus* premiered at the Burgtheater to huge acclaim. So one could entertain the idea that a decade before he turned to formulate a central feature of psychoanalysis, his formative theatrical impressions preconditioned him to see the Sophoclean play in this vivid, living way. A vital link between theory and theatricality is thus forged, and the reception scholar can call it a day.

Upon further investigation, however, things fell apart with this approach. First, it turns out that Freud could *never* have seen Mounet-Sully as Oedipus in Paris. It was not put on at all during his stay. Yet his biographer Jones and his friend Marie Bonaparte kept the factoid alive that he had seen it, even though Bonaparte in particular knew it was not true (that's a long story). Nor is there any evidence that Freud saw the Wilbrandt production at the Burgtheater, though it was much discussed in the papers. If we were willing to make a *minimal* argument, however, we could say it doesn't matter: all Freud needed was the general notion that *Oedipus tyrannus* is a success on the modern stage, even if that was merely hearsay. But I am loath to revert to a general "climatological argument" and contend that the notion was simply "in the

air.” Moreover, given Freud’s bent for empirical observation and anecdotes – not to mention name-dropping – why wouldn’t he at least reference the specific actors or productions that prove his point? The name of Mounet-Sully would certainly have been one to conjure with when *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written in 1898-99, by which time Mounet-Sully had played Oedipus around the world, from Moscow to Athens to Baltimore.

This brings us back to my second question: given the clear outline of the Oedipus story – the *Sagenstoff* as Freud calls it, or “mythic material” – which even Aristotle said would evoke pity and fear just by reading it (*Poetics* 1453b3-6) – why is the *theatricality* of the play essential to Freud’s argument for the universality of the Oedipus complex? At long last, I think I have figured out the right approach to this question. First, the “climatological” argument does make a certain contribution here: Freud takes it for granted that what he describes really happens in the modern theater, and just having read reviews would be sufficient for him to make this assumption. Second and more importantly, the *audience* reaction serves as a quick empirical leap in the argument, and helps to get around a problem inherent in his attempt to take clinical data to make universal psychological theories. Throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud regularly has to remind the reader that his rich experience with neurotic patients is relevant to general psychology, in that the mental life of neurotics is different only in degree and not in kind from healthy people. It was certainly a risk to make a case for the universal nature of Oedipal emotions – the desire to kill one parent and sleep with the other – which he does for the first time publically in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Moreover, this was tricky territory for Freud personally, as his revelation concerning these emotions came from his *self-analysis*, as the letter to Fliess makes very clear from the outset

Ein einziger Gedanke von allgemeinem Wert ist mir aufgegangen. Ich habe die Verliebtheit in die Mutter und die Eifersucht gegen den Vater **auch bei mir** gefunden und halte sie jetzt für ein allgemeines Ereignis früher Kindheit, wenn auch nicht immer so früher wie bei den hysterisch gemachten Kindern. (Masson, 1986, p. 293).

A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, **in my own case too**, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and *I now consider it a universal event in early childhood*, even if not so early as in children who have been made hysterical. (Masson, 1985, p. 272; my emphasis)

At first I had assumed that this leap from a personal discovery of Oedipal emotions to a universal theory applicable to all people could simply be explained as the natural fruit of Freud’s time in the theater. Having been one of many in the audience who felt the power of the play, he could swiftly assume his disturbing self-analysis was actually a discovery of something universally true of all human beings – and what a relief that would be for him personally. But as the historical part of this thesis fell apart, *much* to my regret and dismay I might add, I had to

reconsider entirely the role of theatricality in this whole affair. The question continued to bother me: if personal experience cannot really explain his theatrical approach to Sophocles, then what led him to make the argument in this form? And that is when Hamlet entered the scene.

## Hamlet to the Rescue

From the outset, Freud's argument for the universality of the Oedipus complex was always based *on two plays*, not one. Both in Freud's letter to Fliess from 1897 and in the much expanded argument made in 1899 in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a long analysis of *Hamlet* follows immediately upon his discussion of *König Ödipus*. For a German-speaking audience, *Hamlet* was very comfortable ground: the play was regularly produced throughout the German-speaking world and was much discussed. And for Freud's argument the two plays fit together very nicely, though it is interesting to note an essential difference in his approach to them: whereas Freud insists on the *theatricality* of the Sophoclean play, writing as one in the audience, his discussion of *Hamlet* is more specifically *literary*, and references rather the character Hamlet's Oedipal emotions and even their possible genesis in Shakespeare's own personal situation at the writing of the play. So let's keep an eye on this key difference in approach and ask: why is only *one* of these plays treated theatrically while the other is approached through basic character analysis and a biographical supposition about the author?

A first answer has specifically to do with the nature of Freud's argument. Part of his identification with Oedipus before the Sphinx is that he imagines science to be a process of solving age-old riddles of nature. The shocking discovery that Oedipal emotions are a universal condition seems to float an answer to a question that was not really being asked. That question is: why does Sophocles' play have such power over a modern audience? I say this question was not asked, because for most critics the answer was that Sophocles was a superb playwright or that the actor Mounet-Sully was a brilliant interpreter, or that the director Adolf Wilbrandt had the appropriate taste and vision to bring it across meaningfully for the Viennese. Freud effectively formulates the success of the ancient play with the modern audience as a *riddle*, which he then solves. This is painfully apparent in the completely circular logic of his argument in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

Das Altertum hat uns zur Unterstützung dieser Erkenntnis einen Sagenstoff überliefert, dessen durchgreifende und *allgemeingültige Wirksamkeit nur durch eine ähnliche Allgemeingültigkeit der besprochenen Voraussetzung* aus der Kinderpsychologie verständlich wird. ([1900] 1991, p. 268).

This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and *universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward* in regard to the psychology of children *has an equally universal validity*. (SE 4: 261; my emphasis).

In other words, we can *only* understand the universal power of *Oedipus tyrannus* if Freud's hypothesis of Oedipal emotions is also universal. Freud's long discussion of the Oedipus play deliberately puts us at the center of it, reacting to it and coming to a terrible realization of our own repressed sense of guilt over our Oedipal impulses. The figure embodied on the stage is the wish-fulfillment of our childhood desires, and our reaction is one of a horrified recognition – though the fully conscious recognition remains just below the surface – and *must* remain so.

Having done the harder job of turning *Oedipus tyrannus* into a riddle he just solved, Freud immediately turns to one of literature's most famous "problem plays". Unlike Oedipus, Hamlet's behavior truly is a riddle that even the greatest critics grappled with. Freud gleefully supplies an answer as to why the Prince is so hesitant to perform a revenge that his murdered father demands of him. Unlike Goethe, Freud does not see Hamlet as a man made incapable of action through overthinking; as he points out quite rightly in the cases of the murder of Polonius and the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is capable of swift, violent action. Thus one could *not* diagnose him as a passive neurasthenic, as was done in Freud's day. Hamlet's real problem is that he unconsciously identifies with his uncle, who in killing his father and marrying his mother has merely done what he himself wished to do as a child. His hesitancy to act, in other words, is *neurotic inhibition*, not cowardice. His inhibition to action is not general, but very precise – neurotically precise: he simply cannot kill the man he identifies with. This is a very influential reading of the play, which had its impact on the staging of Hamlet throughout the twentieth century.

Now, from the outset, *Hamlet* always came after Freud's discussion of *Oedipus*, even in the original private formulation in the letter of 1897. However, in the first three editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the long paragraph analyzing *Hamlet* was relegated to a footnote. Only in the fourth edition of 1914 did it find its way into the main text. But this secondary position is completely misleading, because fundamentally, Hamlet, not Oedipus is the figure that corresponds to the condition of the modern adult. What turns Oedipal emotions into a "complex" (as it was termed later) is precisely their repression and relegation to the unconscious, and Freud's analysis of Hamlet is very clear on this account. When Hamlet declares, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," (III, i) Freud sees this as the dim memory of Hamlet's own Oedipal desire to do just what his Uncle has done, and so "His conscience is his unconscious sense of guilt". The German brings out this paradox of being unconsciously conscious even more: "Sein Gewissen ist ein unbewußtes Schuldbewußtsein" (Masson, 1886, p. 294). So Hamlet's condition is one of neurotic inhibition, and as Freud later said in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

Here I have translated into conscious terms what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet's mind; and if anyone is inclined to call him a hysteric, I can only recognize it as the conclusion [to be drawn] from my interpretation. (SE 4: 265; translation altered).

So as paradigmatic as Oedipus is for psychoanalysis, Hamlet is the actual model of *homo Freudianus*, the modern hysteric haunted by his own desires. Or to put it another way: unlike Hamlet, Oedipus does *not* have an Oedipus complex. Oedipus is rather a figure of wish-fulfillment, a kind of perverse ideal of childhood desire from which any well adjusted adult must shrink back in horror. Effectively we the audience stand in relation to Oedipus the way Hamlet stands to his uncle; it is a relation of unconscious identification, tinged with horror and disgust.

Now we come to the real gist of the matter: that is, why Freud's deployment of Oedipus is theatrical while his discussion of Hamlet is characterological. I contend that it is precisely Freud's reading of *Hamlet* that causes him to deploy *Oedipus tyrannus* in this manner, which I would rather now call *metatheatrical*, rather than theatrical. Like Freud, Hamlet has some serious evidentiary concerns. He is worried that the ghost compelling him to kill his uncle might be a devil preying upon his weakness and melancholy in order to damn him. His solution is to use the visiting actors to present a play that mimics the very crime his uncle has allegedly committed. Having just fallen himself under the spell of the actor's brief performance of the murder of Priam, Hamlet decides to have them perform "The murder of Gonzago," into which he will insert "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines". There's a lot going on with the metatheatricality of these players within the play, but for the character of Hamlet, the plan is clear:

I have heard  
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,  
Have by the very cunning of the scene  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;  
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench,  
I know my course. (III, I, 584-594)

So compare this, then, to Freud's theatrical analysis of the audience watching *Oedipus*.

**If** *Oedipus the King* moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, **the explanation can only be** that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and human will, but is to be looked for

in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified. There must be something *which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny* in the *Oedipus* [...]. His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. (SE 4: 262; my emphasis).

Note the rather sudden way in which a conditional premise becomes a fact: *if* the play moves a modern audience as much as it did an ancient Greek one, *then this can only be* by reason of his theory. As I said, Freud has made the play's theatrical success into a riddle he now solves. But very quickly he links the modern playgoer's reaction to an unconscious sense of guilt.

King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfillment of our own childhood wishes. But, more fortunate than he, we have meanwhile succeeded, in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, in detaching our sexual impulses from our mothers and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. Here is one in whom these primeval wishes of our childhood have been fulfilled, and we *shrink back in horror from him with the whole force of the repression by which those wishes have since that time been held down within us*. While the poet, as he unravels the past, brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, *he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found*. (SE 4: 262-263; my emphasis).

Freud's psychodynamics of repression make this scenario more complex than the play within a play in *Hamlet*; unlike Claudius, we only half know our own guilt; if we fully recognized it, like the guilty king in *Hamlet*, we would run from the theater. And the force of our reaction *against* the figure of Oedipus is equal to the force required to keep from being *just like him*; this is what he means when he talks about "the whole force of the repression by which those wishes have since that time been held down within us". This is part of Freud's economics of mental energy, which must always be accounted for. Here the adult and the child are in conflict: the child's powerful Oedipal feelings *require* the force of repression, which is a constant expenditure of energy, not a one-time thing. When we sleep, this repression lessens, and the childhood desires reassert themselves. This is how Oedipus is able to enter *The Interpretation of Dreams* in the midst of a discussion of common dream types. But the virtual reality of the theater also lulls us into relaxing our repression, thus allowing a playwright access to our deeper selves. Because we are distanced from the play as an illusion, we can turn a blind eye to what it's doing to us on a deeper psychological level and assume we're just having an appropriate theatrical experience. Effectively, we do not really know what's going on at a conscious level, though another part of us knows all too well.

I mentioned earlier that the theatrical approach to Oedipus was a way for Freud to leap from his personal discovery of Oedipal feelings to the theory of a universal condition. I think you can see this in his description of what happens in terms of the very pronouns he uses, where he seems to enlist us into his Oedipal army. “There must be something which makes a voice within *us* ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny...”; “His destiny moves *us* only because it might have been *ours*”; “he is [...] compelling *us* to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found” (SE 4: 262). In contrast, Freud always describes Hamlet in the third person as a distinct character and never puts us in the audience of the play; fundamentally he treats Hamlet like one of his hysterical case studies – recall he freely admits one could call him an hysteric. Yet Freud has deliberately imitated Hamlet in putting *us all* together in an audience watching the Oedipus play, giving a description of our reaction to it as proof of our unconscious guilt and the rightness of his own theory. Recall Hamlet’s words: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (III, iii, 600-601). After the king gets up in horror at the play, Hamlet rejoices, “I’ll take the ghost’s / word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?” (III, ii, 280-281). From Hamlet, then, Freud draws the notion that an audience’s reaction can indeed constitute a vital bit of evidence, the psychic truth of hidden guilt.

It’s not just the metatheatrical deployment of a play in this discussion that makes Freud’s fusion of *Hamlet* and *Oedipus the king* so clearly evident. Yes, putting us in the audience watching *Oedipus* is indeed a bit like a “Mouse-trap,” as Hamlet jokingly calls the play he has them put on. In *Hamlet* we also can see how the psychodynamics of theatricality are discussed explicitly by the characters. First there is the matter of aesthetic distancing. “The Murder of Gonzago” is seemingly a foreign play, “written in very choice Italian,” Hamlet claims, though he also calls it “the image of a murder done in *Vienna*”. It’s almost as if Shakespeare was anticipating Freud on that note. Similarly *Oedipus* is an ancient play, seemingly very distant from our modern concerns, as Freud likes to stress. Then there is also an elaborate demonstration of psychological denial, or what in this context we might just call dramatic irony, when the Player Queen drones on and on about her refusal to have any other husband should her man die. This occasions Hamlet’s mother to say, “The lady doth protest too much, / methinks”. Shakespeare allows us to see how the King and Queen of Denmark are made to feel uncannily uncomfortable by the drama as it is being performed. When the King becomes concerned there may be some offence in the play, Hamlet gaily responds, “Tis a knavish piece of work; but what of that? Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches not. Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.” (III, ii). The dramatic irony here is of course that *we know full well* Hamlet plans to offend with this play; his insouciant claim that it is a trifle is a ruse. And the very next thing we see in the play within the play is that Gonzago’s *nephew* poisons the King in the garden. “You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife,” comments Hamlet. At that exact moment the king rises and leaves.

One seldom hears a precise discussion of this scene, so note this: Hamlet stages a play that re-enacts the *method* his uncle used to poison his father, that is, an act of fratricide. But the actual murderer in the Murder of Gonzago is rather Gonzago's *nephew*, which could be seen as a threat: Hamlet the nephew threatening to murder King Claudius, his uncle. If Hamlet *is* the murderous nephew, that would imply he is then supposed to “get the love of Gonzago's wife”; this would mean Hamlet seeks to become the lover of his own mother. No wonder Freud paid so much attention to this play. Not only does it show us the theatricality of the guilty mind; this scene gives us a multilayered display of conversations where light and polite badinage covers deep and sinister undercurrents. It shows people watching a play that appears to mean one thing on the surface, but clearly is about something else. Once King Claudius suspects what it's about, he cannot watch it. Note what Freud says of us:

Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature, and after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scenes of our childhood (SE 4: 263).

Claudius runs from the theatrical representation of the scene of his crime; what are we to do when confronted with the scene of our childhood desires? Admittedly at this point in Freud's literary application of psychoanalysis, he has not explained how *pleasure* in such a tragedy is possible. But within a few years, he would attend to this problem, as he was keenly aware that without understanding our ability to *enjoy* watching *Oedipus tyrannus* or *Hamlet*, he would have misunderstood entirely the kinds of compensations literature and art afford us.

## Conclusion

Let me tie the threads of this presentation together a bit more neatly now by way of conclusion. Freud's reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus tyrannus*, first of all, was remarkably literal for his time. That is, he really felt it was a play about patricide and maternal incest, and nothing else. At the time he wrote this, there were scholars who liked to dissolve these crimes into nature allegories, or refocus the discussion on the nature of human agency in general, discoursing on free will and determinism or the nature of Greek religious thinking as “the real issue” at stake in the play. Freud would have none of it. He is doggedly literal, and forces us to accept that these horrific deeds *are* what they are. However, at the time he had an insight into these two plays, he was losing his ability to believe in actual deeds. His earlier theory that all hysteria originates from sexual molestation had fallen apart, and he was looking for a way to support the idea that childhood *fantasy* of such crimes could have a key role in psychological development. And that's what the Oedipus complex is: a traumatic *fantasy* of love and rivalry, which we learn to repress and overcome. Hamlet, as a mysterious figure of hesitancy, could then be read in the light of Oedipus: Hamlet now is a man whose internal conflict comes from the memory of a traumatic

fantasy, the desire to do what his uncle has actually done. In a way, Freud's reading of Oedipus was effective in being completely literal, while his reading of Hamlet was effective by being completely original, but not at all obvious. Only in the light of Oedipus, could Hamlet now be seen for the inhibited hysteric that he is. But then only in the light of Hamlet could Freud come to imagine how to explain our fascination with Oedipus, a fascination that had only recently become a genuine fact of life in the theaters of Europe. We are Hamlet in the audience as we watch *Oedipus the king*, and suddenly realize we were once Oedipus "in embryo and in fantasy" as he said – *im Keime und in der Phantasie*. For Freud, this fused reading of the two plays was the solution to a problem that went well beyond the texts; yet they remain powerful interpretations of both works to this day. For classical reception, Freud's fused reading presents a powerful case study in *cultural convergence*. Say what you like about the Oedipus complex as a psychological theory, but in this conjoined reading of Sophocles and Shakespeare, we definitely have a striking paradigm for the classical tradition at the dawn of the twentieth century.

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