

SINESTESIEONLINE

SUPPLEMENTO DELLA RIVISTA «SINESTESIE»

ISSN 2280-6849

a. X, n. 32, 2021

RUBRICA "IL PARLAGGIO"

Psychoanalysis and Theatre Revisited: the Function of Character in Mediating Unconscious Processing in Spectatorship

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ABSTRACT

This paper invites the reader to revisit some of the most productive encounters between psychoanalysis and theatre, taking the relationship between character, actor and the spectator's response as its thread. It starts with the discovery of the Oedipus complex and Freud's proposition that theatre reveals our unconscious through the means of characters. Freud leaps from Oedipus to Hamlet in one breath. Hamlet himself, or rather Shakespeare through the words of Hamlet, has a lot to say about the power of theatre to speak not only about, but also to the spectator's unconscious. On the basis of such proposition Hamlet sets up the famous 'play within the play' and in the process remains fulgurated by the dedication of the actor

to the interpretation of his character. In Six Characters in Search of an Author, the device of the play within the play is instead employed to question the legitimacy of any actor's interpretation, foregrounding the complexities implied by the relationship between actor and character. Returning to Freud's reflections on the value of spectatorship, the paper concludes by suggesting how psychoanalysis as a process of interpretation offers precious insights into the function of character as a means of interpretation of the spectator's unconscious.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *spectatorship, psychoanalysis, character, Hamlet*

AUTORE

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Oedipus and the birth of psychoanalysis

The symbiotic relationship between psychoanalysis and theatre roots back to the birth of psychoanalysis itself, testifying to the depth of the connection that exists between these two disciplines. Perhaps this should not surprise, given that both psychoanalysis and theatre are methods for studying the human heart or, shall we rather say, the emotional operations of the unconscious mind. Nothing best than the Oedipus complex exemplifies the common aim and cross-fertilization between these two disciplines.

The first mention of the myth of Oedipus in connection to psychoanalysis is in the letter that Freud sent to his friend, colleague and correspondent Wilhelm Fliess on 15th October 1897. Freud writes:

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 consider it a universal event in early childhood [...]. If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex* [...] the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding 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.¹

It was through the scrutiny of his own unconscious that Freud made one of the most radical discoveries in psychology: that buried within the unconscious of any child there is a wish to gain exclusive possession of the mother, aim which implies the fantasy of the elimination – the murder, in essence – of the father. But this, says Freud, is precisely Oedipus's story: his fatal calling to murder his father and wed his mother. By the time he spoke of Oedipus, Freud had been developing his new psychological therapy for about ten years,² and it was evidence coming from his patients, as well as from his own self-analysis, which confirmed the universality of the Oedipus complex.³

¹ Qtd. in J. MOUSSAIEFF MASSON, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*, trans. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1985, p. 272.

² P. GAY, *Freud. A Life for Our Time*, W. W. Norton, New York 2006.

³ As feminist critique has rightly underscored Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex is a male-centered construction that extends a male preoccupation into an unwarranted generalization about the female mind. (See for instance J. BUTLER, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, Abingdon 1999, p. 56; and L. IRIGARAY, *Psychoanalytic Theory: Another Look*, in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. C. Porter with C. Burke, Cornell University Press, New York 1993, pp. 34-67). It will take at least Melanie Klein's examination of the point in question to reach a more gender-equitable description of the Oedipus complex. (See M. KLEIN, *The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties*, in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, Vintage, London 1998, pp. 290-305). Nevertheless, while allowing for further extensions and improvements, we must credit Freud

One could ask whether the impression that Oedipus's drama had made on Freud at an earlier time may have been the decisive factor which allowed him to recognize his own unconscious Oedipal desires. In other words: would Freud have ever discovered his Oedipus complex if he had not been a spectator of Oedipus's drama? Incidentally, the term "drama" in English (and in many other European languages) denotes both the literary genre in which the story is told and also the tragic nature of the events that unfold: *Oedipus Rex* is a drama as a literary genre but it is also a drama because it is a story of highly emotional, tragic import. Whether Sophocles' writing of a tragedy was necessary to Freud's discovery, we may never know. Freud himself, however, may have been inclined to believe it, given what he wrote about the merits of the creative writer: "The description of the human mind is indeed the domain which is most his own; he has from time immemorial been the precursor of science, and so too of scientific psychology."⁴ In any case, whether Sophocles' immortal drama may or not have been instrumental in allowing Freud to discover the Oedipus complex, at the very least it provided him with a symbolic name for its effective designation.

It is in the aforementioned letter to Fliess, where Freud communicates to his friend his discovery of Oedipus, that he extends his insights about the Oedipus complex to offer an innovative interpretation of a Shakespearian play. He writes: "Fleetingly the thought passed through my mind that the same thing might be at the bottom of *Hamlet* as well."⁵ In the same breath in which Freud discovers the significance of Oedipus's drama for human psychology, he offers an explanation for a problem of literary criticism concerning *Hamlet*, which had first been highlighted by a critical essay on the play of 1736.⁶

Hamlet's Oedipus complex

Freud⁷ first published his analysis of Hamlet's motives in the *Interpretation of Dreams*:

with the discovery of this universal unconscious psychic function, which underlies so many aspects of psychic development, from the structuring of emotional attachments, to the formation of character and identity.

⁴ S. FREUD, *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen's "Gradiva" and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1907, pp. 1-95, quote on pp. 43-44.

⁵ Qtd. in MASSON, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904* cit., p.272.

⁶ C. WATTS, *Hamlet*, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, London 1988, p. xxiii.

⁷ S. FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV and V*, The Hogarth Press, London 1900, pp. ix-627, quote on p. 264.

Another of the great creations of tragic poetry, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has its roots in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*. But the changed treatment in the same material reveals the whole difference in the mental life of these two widely separated epochs of civilization: the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind. In the *Oedipus* the child's wishful phantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realized as it would be in a dream. In *Hamlet* it remains repressed; and – just as in the case of a neurosis – we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences.

Ernest Jones⁸ later expanded on Freud's brief exposition of the psychoanalytic study of *Hamlet* in a longer essay which contributed to the popularity of Freud's unprecedented interpretation of some aspects of the play. His work was entitled *Hamlet and Oedipus* and was first published in 1919.

A crucial situation in *Hamlet* is that of the protagonist's inaction in the face of his duty to revenge his father. Hamlet has come back to Denmark following the death of his father the king, and he is perturbed by the unfolding of events at the court: barely two months have passed since the funeral, and already the dead king's brother Claudius, having become king himself, has wed Hamlet's mother Gertrude. What to Hamlet seems a most unnatural situation ("The funeral baked meats/ did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables", 1.2.180-81)⁹ finds its explanation in the revelations that he receives from the ghost of his father. The ghost-king relates how he did not die a natural death: his brother Claudius poisoned him, so that he could ascend to the throne and fulfill his incestuous sexual desires toward his wife Gertrude. Incidentally, it is useful to note that in Shakespeare's times sexual relationships between in-laws (such as that between Gertrude and Claudius) were considered incestuous and prohibited by canon law.¹⁰ Almost at the beginning of the play Hamlet has therefore a motive, and a mandate from the ghost, for murder: he must kill Claudius in order to revenge his father. And yet, the whole play is constructed on Hamlet's delay in carrying out his objective.

Why does Hamlet remain for so long unresolved in enacting his revenge toward his uncle? The reasons behind Hamlet's hesitations had long been considered a critical impasse, but Freud, and Jones following him, propose that these hesitations rather represent the 'critical significance' of the play. Various explanations were put forth by scholars and readers of the play to explain Hamlet's inaction, many of which

⁸ E. JONES, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, W. W. Norton, New York 1976.

⁹ All quotations from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are from: W. SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. P. Edwards, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987.

¹⁰ C. WATTS, *Hamlet* cit., pp. 30-31.

Jones¹¹ discusses in his study. In Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*,¹² for instance, it is suggested that Hamlet's inhibition is due to his noble and moral nature, incompatible with the energy needed to accomplish a decisive action such as murder. This particular interpretation enjoyed much fortune and was adopted by other eminent readers, including the English romantic poet Samuel Coleridge,¹³ who in his *Lectures and notes on Shakespeare* speaks of Hamlet as being affected by "an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities." And yet, as Freud¹⁴ and Jones¹⁵ are keen to point out, Hamlet shows to be capable of decisive actions when he kills Polonius hidden behind the curtain in his mother's bedroom, or when he sends the two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to their death. Therefore, it should not be assumed that Hamlet is incapable of resolute action and murder. If so then, what is the ultimate motive behind Hamlet's inhibition?

According to Freud¹⁶ what lies at the heart of *Hamlet's* drama is the Oedipal drama indeed. Hamlet's delayed action depends on his reluctance to give credibility to the ghost's intimations, from which stems his need to verify for himself that Claudius's crime has truly been committed. Such reluctance is easily understood, says Freud, if it is recognized that Claudius's deeds are too close an actualization of Hamlet's Oedipal desires: his childhood fantasy of killing his father in order to possess his mother. Such correspondence is by necessity an impingement on Hamlet's unconscious mind: admitting to his uncle's culpability must by association awaken Hamlet's own guilty conscience. In an attempt to keep his childhood fantasies repressed, Hamlet must dismiss the plausibility of Claudius's culpable actions.

In a style which will become a classical approach of psychoanalytic literary criticism, Freud¹⁷ and, much more extensively, Jones¹⁸ develop their analysis from the unconscious motives of the character to the unconscious motives of the author and suggest that Shakespeare's own Oedipal phantasies are worked through in the play¹⁹, particularly given that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* soon after his father's

¹¹ E. JONES, *Hamlet and Oedipus* cit., pp. 22-44.

¹² J. W. GOETHE, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, ed. and trans. E. A. Blackall in cooperation with V. Lange, Suhrkamp Publishers, New York 1989, p. 146.

¹³ S. T. COLERIDGE, *Hamlet*, in *Notes and Lectures*, Edward Howell, Liverpool 1874, pp. 201-28, quote on p. 203.

¹⁴ S. FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams* cit., p. 265.

¹⁵ E. JONES, *Hamlet and Oedipus* cit., p. 32.

¹⁶ S. FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams* cit., p. 265.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ E. JONES, *Hamlet and Oedipus* cit., pp. 111-126.

¹⁹ Freud later retracted this proposition on the grounds that he did not believe Shakespeare to be the author of *Hamlet*: see his note in the *Interpretation of Dreams* (S. FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

death. Picking up on this and other attempts by Freud to reach artists' personal unconscious motives through the analysis of their works of art – see for instance his study of Leonardo's painting *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* or of Jensen's novel *Gradiva*²⁰ – psychoanalytic criticism has been applied to the examination of artists' unconscious dynamics and personal motives. These endeavors have greatly contributed to the discrediting of psychoanalysis as a critical instrument. In fact, even worse, they have detracted psychoanalysis's attention from its most fertile field of action. The real treasure in the affinity between theatre and psychoanalysis lies in their mutual curiosity for the unconscious emotional life of the mind and their interest in making it the object of their study. Freud credited artists with the primacy over the unveiling of depth psychology, which they achieve through a surrogate form of self-analysis. As Freud's own self-analysis was an instrument for the advance of psychoanalytic knowledge and its insights applied to the understanding and cure of his patients, so the value of the artist's self-analysis, beyond the self-referential element of working through her unconscious conflicts, must lie in what her discoveries may have to offer to the spectator, reader, or critic of her work.

Hamlet and the power of theatre on the mind

The play of *Hamlet* is interesting for psychoanalysis beyond the Oedipal junction, for it contains a demonstration that theatre can be a tool for psychological insight. It is precisely through theatre that Hamlet puts to the test his uncle's culpability, at the same time that the "play within the play" demonstrates theatre's capability to perturb the mind of the spectator. As it happens, a troupe of actors appears at the Danish court, as Hamlet is struggling with his hesitation to take revenge. Hamlet seizes the opportunity of having the actors work as his allies in his quest for truth. The actors shall perform a play entitled *The Murder of Gonzago* in which the enacted events mirror those which have led to the murder of his father: Gonzago the king, happily married and innocently falling asleep in his garden, is poisoned by his nephew, who treacherously succeeds him to the throne and, after little resistance, gains the hand of his wife the queen. The play will be performed in front of Claudius,

cit., p. 266) and a footnote added to his *Autobiographical Study* (S. FREUD, *An Autobiographical Study*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XX (1925-1926): An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, Lay Analysis and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1925, pp. 1-74, footnote on pp. 63-64.)

²⁰ See: S. FREUD, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XI (1910): Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1910, pp. 59-138; and ID., *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*.

Gertrude, and the court, and Hamlet and his friend Horace will keep Claudius's response as spectator under close scrutiny: his emotional reaction to the play will signify his innocence or his guilt as concerns the murder of his brother the king.

The play within the play is a test of psychic truth, a test which far from being dependent on the collection of material evidence, functions on a purely psychological level. As Hamlet himself puts it: "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.557-58). Claudius is placed in front of the vicarious enactment of his criminal deeds; the test of truth consists in the power of such re-enactment to arouse Claudius's suppressed conscience, to break through his dissimulation of feelings. Indeed, the play drives Claudius to increased agitation, until he cannot bear to watch it any longer and leaves the audience, revealing, through his alarmed appearance and his discomposed behavior, his guilty conscience.

Claudius and Gertrude are masters of dissimulation, and this is perhaps their greatest sin, that which Hamlet cannot condone. Hamlet's soliloquies are punctuated with bitter remarks about the deceptive nature of displays of feelings in his fellow men and women, and his efforts foremost directed to making other characters face their true emotions. Even Ophelia, the least corrupted character of the play, comes to conceal her love for Hamlet at her father's command. Concealing and feigning feelings is the way in which characters hide their secret wishes or crimes, manipulating others into a system of falsehood and duplicity. Wearing black, sighing, or shedding tears is no proof of the truth of one's grief "For they are actions that a man might play" (1.2.84).

Paradoxically, that truthfulness of feelings which is not to be found in everyday life, not even in the innocent Ophelia, appears to be the prerogative of actors, of those same men who by profession are called to play and feign. Significant and moving is the moment when Hamlet comments on the *First Player's* delivery of a theatrical speech about Hecuba's grief for the brutal murder of her husband Priam:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,/ But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,/ could force his soul so to his own conceit/ That from her working all his visage waned,/ Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,/ A broken voice [...] And all for nothing?/ For Hecuba!/ What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,/ That he should weep for her? (2.2.503-12)

The actor pales and sheds tears "in a dream of passion" where his imagination has transported him so that he is enabled to express truthful feelings. Differently from Claudius's and Gertrude's fake display of grief for the death of the king, the actor's representation of grief is sincere: his feigning and playing are put at the service of emotional truth. And it is this sincerity of feeling that has the power to awaken Claudius's conscience.

In his famous speech to the actors, Hamlet proclaims that “the purpose of playing [...] was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature” (3.2.17-19). By the context of his speech, in which he is concerned primarily with the actor’s emotional expression, this mirroring function must signify, at least at one level, the necessity for theatre to show emotional truth. But whose truth? That of the play’s characters: “For Hecuba!” Because this is the paradox of the actor, that he genuinely feels what he has no reason to feel: “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba”? The emotional duplicity of the actor runs contrary to Claudius’s and Gertrude’s duplicity: Claudius and Gertrude do not feel where they should naturally and reasonably be expected to; the actor feels where he has no natural reason for doing so, except... Except that impersonating the feelings of the characters is the essence of the actor’s work.

Characters in search of an actor

In his celebrated play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, first published in 1921, Pirandello²¹ toys with some ideas that echo those of *Hamlet*. Six characters – who derive their existence from a drama which has not yet been written, hence their “search for an author” - arrive at a theatre while a troupe of actors is rehearsing for a play. They have a story to tell, their story, which incidentally is rich in references to the fantasies of the Oedipus complex, and the sexual attractions and hateful jealousies that constitute the crude dynamics at its core.

The encounter between characters and actors is from the start an uncomfortable one. The characters bring with them a preoccupation with the truthfulness of everyday life as opposed to the truth of the theatre. As the character of the *Father* tells the actors at the start of the play: “You’ve given life! You’ve created living beings with more genuine life than people have who breathe and wear clothes! Less real, perhaps, but nearer the truth.”²² Like in *Hamlet*, the device of the “play within the play”, that the six characters employ to present their story to the troupe of actors and to their actor-manager, becomes a means that triggers reflections on the relationship of the actor with the character’s feelings. But here the conclusions arrived at run somewhat in contrast to those in *Hamlet*. The six characters affirm the sincerity of their emotional life in opposition to what they perceive as the illegitimate representations that actors will do of their feelings when they will enact their story. The *Father*, who functions as the spokesman for his fellow characters, voices their protest about the necessary gap that exists between the truth of the character and the

²¹ L. PIRANDELLO, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. J. Linstrum, Methuen, London 2004.

²² Ivi, p. 12.

interpretation of the actor. Referring to the leading actor who will be given his role, he says:

I think that no matter how hard this gentleman works with all his will and all his art to identify himself with me... [...] it will be difficult for it to be a performance of me as I really am [...] it will be more an interpretation of what I am, what he believes me to be, and not how I know myself to be.²³

The variance between the emotional life of the character and that of the actor proves itself when, eventually, the actors –who for most of the play operate as spectators for the “play within the play” – get on the stage to play the characters’ roles. At this point, the divergence between actors’ and characters’ emotional life is brought to the fore by the way in which the *Stepdaughter* reacts to the watching of the enactment of a scene by the leading actress: she laughs. And the reason for this laughter, as the *Father* explains, is the estrangement that characters feel when watching the actors play them: “the scene made such a peculiar impact on us... [...] they’re not us...”; to which the actor-manager (*Producer*) replies: “Right! They’re not! They’re actors!”²⁴ This apparent banality, that actors are not characters, harbors more significance than it seems, and so does the actor-manager’s insistence that at the theatre characters must, perforce, be played by actors, as when he tells the *Father*: “characters don’t act here, my dear chap. It’s actors who act here. The characters are in the script.”²⁵

Pirandello’s play has a multiplicity of meanings which extend much beyond the reflections on the relationship between characters and actors. His play has been considered to be, among other things, a critique of bourgeois society and of its theatre, and the style of the play has been shown to use techniques of alienation akin, at least in their outcomes, to those of Brecht’s epic theatre.²⁶ Given this context, it should perhaps not surprise that the play seems to justify a certain distrust for the possibility of the actor’s emotional identification with the character. If in *Hamlet* the actor’s capacity for emotional truth becomes an admonition against the hypocrisy of mankind, on the stage of Pirandello’s play actors are reminded that their aspiration to impersonate their characters will always be restrained by the necessary gap that exists between a character and its interpretation. But again, this application of the actor to a character who is nothing else to her than a role to be played (as Hamlet says: “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba”) is not only the essence of the actor’s

²³ Ivi, p. p. 40.

²⁴ Ivi, p. p. 53.

²⁵ Ivi, p. p. 37.

²⁶ R. ALONGE, *Introduzione*, in L. PIRANDELLO, *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore. Enrico IV*, Mondadori, Milano 1993, pp. VII-XXI.

work, but it is, seen from the other angle, also the predicament of the character. As the actor-manager (*Producer*) cogently tells the *Father*: “Do you think you have exclusive rights to what you represent? Do you think it can only exist inside you? Not a bit of it!”²⁷ There is something about the interface between actor and character that is at one time compelling, mysterious, and disconcerting. As Artaud²⁸ commented about Pirandello’s play: “And yet these Six Characters are still personified by actors! In this the whole question of theatre is raised.”

Catharsis and the effect of theatre on emotions

In an essay entitled *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage*, which he wrote in 1905 but never published during his lifetime, Freud²⁹ offered his view of the function of spectatorship in the theatre. Taking Aristotle’s theory of tragic catharsis as his source of authority, Freud re-elaborated it through his psychoanalytic insights. In a most commented passage of the *Poetics* (1449b24-28), Aristotle states that tragedy induces, in spectators, the catharsis of fear and pity. Being the most famous formulation of spectatorship of all times, this pronouncement has also been the subject of fervent discussion and controversy because readers could not agree on what catharsis signified or entailed.³⁰ By the time Freud was writing his essay, one particular reading of catharsis had become the most accepted, that of “purgation”: reinterpreting Aristotle, tragedy was supposed to generate a purgation or discharge of emotions from the spectator’s mind. One of the most influential contributions to the translation of catharsis as purgation was a book by Jakob Bernays³¹, originally published in German in 1857, which emphasized how in Aristotle’s time catharsis was a medical term, which the Greek philosopher had transplanted into literary theory.³²

²⁷ L. PIRANDELLO, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* cit., p. 39.

²⁸ A. ARTAUD, *Six Characters in Search of an Author at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées*, in *Collected Works. Volume Two*, trans. V. Corti, John Calder Publishers Ltd., London 1999, pp. 134-35, quote on p. 135.

²⁹ S. FREUD, *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1906, pp. 303-10.

³⁰ See: S. HALLIWELL, *Catharsis*, in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. D. E. Cooper, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, pp. 61-63; and J. LEAR, *Katharsis*, in «Phronesis», XXXIII, 3, 1988, pp. 297-326.

³¹ J. BERNAYS, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Drama*, W. Hertz, Berlin 1880. A chapter of this book has been translated as *Aristotle on the Effects of Tragedy* by Jonathan and Jennifer Barnes in Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji, eds., *Articles on Aristotle, Vol. 4*, Duckworth, London 1979. Notably, Jakob Bernays was Freud’s wife’s uncle, and Freud was well acquainted with his work. [See F. STOK, *Psychology*, in *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, ed. Craig W. Callendorf, Wiley, Oxford 2010, pp. 355-70].

³² S. HALLIWELL, *Catharsis* cit.

Following the accepted nineteenth-century translation of catharsis as purgation, Freud maintained that spectators derive pleasure from the theatre by identifying with the sufferings of the tragic hero. Such identification is enjoyable but harmless, because the spectator, while putting himself emotionally in the hero's place, remains aware of the fictional context of his emotional experience. So, in identification with the tragic hero, a spectator can fulfill his unconscious desire for great deeds, and experience all the frights, horrors and triumphs connected with the heroic action, but with the consolation that "firstly, it is someone other than himself who is acting and suffering on the stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to his personal security."³³

The interpretation of catharsis as emotional release carries with it certain implications, which have inflamed the censure against theatre by more than one eminent voice, and among others that of Bertolt Brecht. The German playwright accepted, like Freud did, the translation of catharsis as purgation – in fact in their writings they both use the German word *Reinigung* – but departing from the notion that conventional theatre induces in the audience a "safe" discharge of emotions as an end in itself, Brecht³⁴ concluded that in such a way, theatre becomes an instrument for political submission and social conformism. As a remedy, he created the epic theatre, in which actors deliberately refrain from becoming emotionally identified with the characters so that spectators are also inhibited in their emotional response, generating an emotional detachment which, as I mentioned earlier, he famously called the *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Most probably, Brecht did not know Freud's essay on spectatorship, which was first published in 1942. But if he could have used Freud's words, Brecht would have said that if the theatre was only a game, where spectators identifying with immaterial characters could enjoy great pleasure in having their emotions released, while never having to take any responsibility for the characters' actions, then theatre was contributing to the creation of morally and socially irresponsible citizens. In fact, Brecht's essay *The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre*³⁵ contains a quotation from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Brecht employs Freud's words to support his claim that conventional theatre acts as a narcotic drug which numbs spectators' critical engagement and leads them to the abdication of social responsibility. The quote, following Brecht's own omissions, runs as follows:

Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative

³³ S. FREUD, *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* cit., quote on p. 306.

³⁴ B. BRECHT, *Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect*.

³⁵ ID., *The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre*.

measures. [...] There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. Something of the kind is indispensable. [...] The substitutive satisfactions, as offered by art, are illusions in contrast with reality, but they are none the less psychically effective, thanks to the role which phantasy has assumed in mental life.³⁶

Freud seems to believe that theatre's (and art's) ultimate aim is to furnish man with an escapist route into a fantasy world, with little scope for affecting psychological change. It could be argued, in fact, that Freud's theorizing about spectatorship corroborates Brecht's preoccupations about the function of the theatre.

Catharsis, transference and emotional processing in alpha-function

Freud's use of the concept of catharsis testifies to another very interesting cross-pollination between psychoanalysis and theatre, which again roots back to the birth of psychoanalysis. In *Studies on Hysteria*,³⁷ Freud and Breuer named their psychotherapeutic treatment the "cathartic method": after it resided for many centuries in literary theory, Freud and Breuer returned the concept of catharsis back to medicine. The cathartic method was the precursor to psychoanalysis, as it would be developed by Freud in the next fifteen years. At this time in his clinical career, Freud used hypnosis to induce the patient to re-experience and give expression to her previously repressed emotions. Such procedure was supposed to lead to the release of "strangled" affects (Freud's term) from the patient's unconscious, with the re-establishment of a disencumbered mind: in the hypnotic revival of past emotional traumas and the consequent emotional release, patients could undergo the cathartic cure.

Freud's further re-elaborations of his model of the mind and of his understanding of how psychoanalysis treats mental pathology, led him to discover transference and to change his theory of its curative principles: the cathartic method was abandoned both in the practice and in the theory of psychoanalysis and it was replaced

³⁶ S. FREUD, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1930, pp. 57-146. This English translation of Freud's words as quoted by Brecht is taken from the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, as per reference, and it is therefore slightly different from J. Willet's own translation of Brecht's essay.

³⁷ S. FREUD, J. BREUER, *Studies on Hysteria* cit.

by the method of transference analysis. As I have argued elsewhere,³⁸ the conceptualization of emotional processing put forth by the theory of transference affords an interpretation of spectatorship as a form of transference analysis. By moving his understanding of psychoanalysis forward, away from the cathartic method and in the direction of the transference, Freud helps us advance our understanding of Aristotle's theory of tragic catharsis (and of spectatorship), away from the idea of catharsis as emotional release and in the direction of spectatorship as emotional processing.

While it was supposed that in the cathartic method repressed emotions could be eliminated from the mind by a mechanism of discharge, in the theory of transference repressed emotions are understood to undergo a refined form of emotional processing. In the transference, repressed emotions are not represented in the patient's mind, but they are re-enacted: they manifest themselves in the relationship between the patient and the analyst. For example, repressed anger is re-enacted, in the transference, as anger at the analyst. Freud understood that the work of analysis depended crucially on the way in which the analyst responded to the re-enacted emotions. If the analyst reciprocated the re-enactment with her own emotional reaction (what in psychoanalytic jargon is known as "acting in") not only would the patient's emotions remain repressed, but the patient may suffer a re-traumatization. As Freud writes with reference to a particular form of transference re-enactment, that of the erotic transference:

If the patient's advances were returned it would be a great triumph for her, but a complete defeat for the treatment. She would have succeeded [...] in acting out, in repeating in real life, what she ought only to have remembered, to have reproduced as psychical material and to have kept within the sphere of psychical events.³⁹

The task of the analyst is precisely that of maintaining a reflective stance toward the re-enacted emotions, so that they can be brought from the unconscious sphere of action, to the conscious sphere of thought. Wilfred Bion,⁴⁰ an eminent psychoanalyst who developed a theory of thinking on the basis of Freud's conceptualizations of emotional development, will describe this transformation of emotions as alpha-function, a reflective psychic process which transforms primitive unconscious emotions, only suitable for re-enactment, into thoughts about emotions. Alpha-function

³⁸ M. G. TURRI, *Transference and katharsis, Freud to Aristotle*, in *Acting, Spectating and the Unconscious* cit., pp. 17-37.

³⁹ S. FREUD, *Observations on Transference-Love (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis III)*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1915, pp. 157-171, quote on p. 166.

⁴⁰ W. R. BION, *Learning from Experience*, Karnac, London 1984.

is an act of understanding which transforms emotions by endowing them with meaning. This constitutes the core of the analyst's task of interpretation.

As I have amply discussed elsewhere,⁴¹ there is yet a further striking parallel between psychoanalysis and theatre: interpretation is the main task of the analyst in the analysis of transference, and the main task of the actor in relation to the character. The fact that both disciplines sustain themselves on the work of interpretation, is not a question of homonymy: the analyst's interpretation and the actor's interpretation are analogous because they both ground in alpha-function and the emotional processing that this entails.

In psychoanalysis, the role of the analyst is to interpret the transference emotional re-enactments which emanate from her encounter with the patient. As Bion put it:

There is a field of emotional force in which the individuals seem to lose their boundaries as individuals and become 'areas' around and through which emotions play at will. Psycho-analyst and patient cannot exempt themselves from the emotional field.⁴²

This emotional field is, in analysis, the re-enactment of repressed emotions in the transference.

In the theatre, the actor interprets the character's emotions – or at least this can be said for those forms of theatre where it is deemed necessary that the actor understands and reproduces the character's emotions, as is the case of the Stanislavskian method of acting. But even when the emotional identification of the actor with her character is put into question or rejected, as is the case in Brecht's epic theatre, the actor still must confront the task of establishing a specific attitude in relation to the character's emotions. In other words, whether it involves feeling or not, the actor must always concern herself with the emotional life of her character.

The work of the actor and the function of the character

Hamlet is perplexed by actors applying their work of interpretation to characters with whom they have no connection outside the fiction of the play. Characters seem to exist for the purpose of inducing actors to interpret them. But of course characters are not strictly speaking invented for actors, they are created for the sake of spectators. Hamlet himself gives us direct proof of this when he employs the play

⁴¹ M. G. TURRI, *Acting and Spectating in Alpha-function*, in *Acting, Spectating and the Unconscious* cit., pp. 98-128.

⁴² W. R. BION, *Second Thoughts*, Karnac, London 1984, quote on p. 146.

The Murder of Gonzago to test Claudius's identification with the character of the murderer, in the hope that such identification may awaken Claudius's conscience, or rather unveil his unconscious emotions. Claudius has killed his brother, but we have reason to think that while he remains conscious of his crime, he has successfully repressed emotions such as horror or guilt, which he may have experienced at the time of the deed. Or, at least, he seems able to conduct his life as if he feels no guilt or horror at his actions. The actor who impersonates the murderer in the play will enact the scene of the murder by arousing in himself those emotions which are pertinent to his character's action, if he is to give truth to his impersonation. The actor's impersonation of the character has nothing to do with the actor's personal commitment to the character outside the fiction of the play. Yet, it is precisely through his impersonation that the emotional resonance between Claudius and the character of the murderer can be realized, emotional resonance which is instrumental to reveal Claudius's guilt.

It appears in fact that Claudius's act of spectatorship leads him to a form of self-awareness which has connected emotions with meaning. After he has hastily quit the scene of the "play within the play" fuming with rage, we next encounter Claudius trying to pray for the redemption of his crime. In this monologue, he expresses for the first time horror at his deed: "What if this cursed hand/ Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,/ Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens/ to wash it white as snow?" (3.3.43-46), showing not simply a matter-of-fact awareness of having committed the murder, but rather a deeply affected realization of the moral import of his action. So much so that for the first and only time in the play Claudius can take a point of view of his situation which comes nearest that of Hamlet:

"Forgive me for my foul murder"?/ That cannot be, since I am still possessed/ Of those effects for which I did the murder,/ My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen./ May one be pardoned and retain th'offence?/ [...] there the action lies/ In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled/ Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults/ To give in evidence. (3.3.52-64)

The emotional truth which was mirrored in the "play within the play" compels Claudius, if for a brief moment, to renounce that duplicity of feelings which was made possible, at least in part, by mechanisms of repression and denial. The "play within the play" has furnished Claudius with a new understanding of himself, to which he was previously oblivious. The actor's commitment to the character, bewildering as it appears, has found its reason in the psychological changes that it imparts to the spectator's mind.

Albeit short-lived, the effect of the emotional encounter between Claudius and the character of the murderer is of a different kind from the purification of emotions

that is predicted by an interpretation of catharsis as purgation. Claudius's watching of the play is not, as one should suppose if taking Freud's theory of spectatorship at face value, a pleasurable identification accompanied by a sense of safe estrangement. In such case, it should be admitted with Brecht that theatre would have functioned as the means of numbing the spectator's critical judgment and supporting his abdication of social responsibility. On the contrary, Claudius's emotional arousal is accompanied by a most uncomfortable awareness of the personal meaning of the play he is witnessing. By reducing him to be a spectator, Hamlet has indeed contrived to "catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.557-58).

Departing from a conventional interpretation of catharsis as purgation, Brecht was preoccupied with the idea that emotional engagement in spectatorship led the audience to a passive surrender to the characters' emotions, their emotional participation being relinquished at the end of the performance. Similarly, the French philosopher Rousseau gave as one of the reasons for his condemnation of theatre his belief that the spectators' emotional experience within the auditorium remained insulated from any emotional or moral development in their real life:

Thus did the tyrant of Phœrae hide himself at the play, lest he should be seen to sigh with Andromache and Priamus, while he felt not the least concern at the cries of so many unfortunates, who were every day butchered by his orders.⁴³

But Brecht (and Rousseau) had not considered the possibility that the spectator's engagement with the character is an engagement with oneself, with one's own repressed emotions, as Hamlet perfectly knows. Spectatorship under such light becomes an opportunity for emotional processing and moral development.⁴⁴ Diderot once displayed this same conviction when he commented on the effect that a theatrical performance has on wicked men: they are moved to compassion against the injustices that they themselves commit, and this is not a temporary and shallow effect, but a transformative one: "the impression has been received; it stays with us; and the wicked man exits from his loge less disposed to do harm than if he had been reprimanded by a stern and harsh orator."⁴⁵

⁴³ J. J. ROUSSEAU, *Letter from M. Rousseau, of Geneva, to M. d'Alembert, of Paris, Concerning the Effects of Theatrical Entertainments on the Manners of Mankind*, trans. from the French (London: Printed for J. Nourse at the Lamb opposite Katherine-Street in the Strand, 1759), quote on p. 24.

⁴⁴ For an extensive discussion of this argument see: M. G. TURRI, *Acting, Spectating and the Unconscious*.

⁴⁵ D. DIDEROT, *Théâtre: Le Fils naturel, Le Joueur, Le Père de famille, De la poésie dramatique*, ed. Jules Assézat (Librairie Garnier Frères, Paris 1939), quote on p. 312. The translation into English is mine. Original French text: «l'impression est reçue; elle demeure en nous, malgré nous; et le méchant sort de sa loge, moins disposé à faire le mal, que s'il eût été gourmandé par un orateur severe et dur».

Although Freud never developed any further the ideas he presented in *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage*, in his seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he briefly returned to the subject of spectatorship. In a short comment, which is interwoven within more substantial reflections on children's play, he hints at the possibility that spectatorship may be an opportunity for the "working over" of unpleasurable (repressed) material:

Finally, a reminder may be added that the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children's, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convincing proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind.⁴⁶

The function of the character is not that of a simple vessel for the discharge of emotional tension. It is rather the "emotional field" where the spectator's emotions meet the actor's interpretation and are worked through from the unconscious to the conscious through the actor's alpha-function. But as we have seen, there is something bewildering about the link between the actor and her character: it is the irrelevance of their connection outside the theatre – "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba." Perhaps this question is not far from expressing that puzzlement that catches the analyst and her patient in their most intimate moments: who are they to each other? And yet this apparent estrangement outside the analytic situation is what makes analysis possible. Similarly I argue that it is the estrangement of the actor from her character outside the situation of the play that makes spectatorship a place for emotional processing.

That the actor's work of interpretation has to do with emotional processing is supported by Hamlet's ideas about the art of the actor. In his famous speech to the actors, Hamlet demands that their work be accomplished by applying a form of regulation to the expression of emotions: "for in the very torrent, tempest, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness" (3.2.4-7). He is not denying the necessity of a vigorous emotional arousal, but placing himself in a line of thinking that transverse theories of acting from ancient rhetoric to Stanislavski and beyond, he exhorts actors to "beget a temperance" which resembles the analyst's need to remain reflective in the face of the

⁴⁶ S. FREUD, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, The Hogarth Press, London 1920, pp. 1-64, quote on p. 17.

patient's re-enacted emotions. Such reflectiveness is not always welcomed by the patient, especially when he feels that the analyst's interpretations distort or deaden the significance of his emotions. That is why the six characters' distrust for the actors' rendition of their emotions is justified in as much as, as every patient in psychoanalysis knows, the analyst's work of interpretation – when it is effective – frustrates her desires to re-enact “what she ought only to have remembered, to have reproduced as psychological material.”⁴⁷ The re-enactment must be “frustrated” by the curative function of analysis, a place where the analyst appropriates the patient's emotional experience and “transforms” it into a thought which is, to paraphrase the *Father* of the six characters, “more an interpretation”⁴⁸ of what the patient's emotional experience is, and not what the patient believes it to be.

The fact that emotional processing emerges from the frustration of a re-enactment, offers an interesting psychoanalytic insight into the interpretation of Hamlet's inaction. Hamlet's hesitation in taking revenge may represent his struggle against “acting in” to the re-enactment and his striving for a psychological, rather than a practical, resolution. Hamlet is busy pressing Claudius and Gertrude to reach consciousness of the significance of their misdeeds. His aspiration to a form of emotional maturity which may emancipate his fellow men (and perhaps himself) from enslavement to the passions, is testified by his exhortation to Horatio:

And blest are those/ Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled/ That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger/ To sound what stop she please. Give me that man/ That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him/ in my heart's core, ay in my heart of heart,/ As I do thee'. (3.2.58-64)

In this sense, Goethe's and Coleridge's explanations for Hamlet's inaction may accord with the psychoanalytic idea that Hamlet's apparent passivity of action, corresponds in truth to a complimentary fervent activity of his unconscious mind, intent on the task of emotional processing. Such task is the gift of the actor to the spectator, if the character that she interprets is not only to be intended as a role in the play, but also as those mental and moral qualities which will contribute to the spectator's psychic development.

⁴⁷ ID., *Observations on Transference-Love (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis III)* cit., quote on p. 166.

⁴⁸ L. PIRANDELLO, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* cit., p. 40.