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# *The Oedipus Complex in “Hamlet”: Laertes as Hamlet’s double*

Relatrice  
Prof.ssa Alessandra Petrina

Laureanda  
Laura Bazzani  
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## Foreword

My thesis – divided into three chapters – aims at analysing the Oedipus Complex in Hamlet and its possible applicability to Laertes. In the first chapter, I take under observation psychoanalytical studies which have tried to understand the meaning of Hamlet's inaction, which is called Sphinx of Modern Literature, by exploring Hamlet's relation with his mother. I analyse Freud's hypothesis written in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. According to him, Hamlet suffers from the Oedipus Complex – the sexual instinct toward the parent of the opposite sex. This idea was later revised by the British critic Ernest Jones who wrote *Hamlet and Oedipus* in 1949. He was the first one to apply the Oedipus Complex to the character of Laertes. At this point, I take under observation the movie *Hamlet* directed by Laurence Olivier inspired by Jones' ideas. Olivier proposed oedipal allusions – the castle represents a prison of the mind, while Hamlet's unconscious conflicts and Gertrude's sexuality are greatly underlined.

Chapter two offers the comparison between Hamlet and his double Laertes in order to understand if the Oedipus Complex can be applied to the latter. In fact, the character of Laertes does not appear in the sources of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest used by Shakespeare. Laertes may have been introduced in the tragedy by Shakespeare to show to the Prince how a pious son should behave. Both Laertes and Hamlet have lost a father, but the way they manage the revenge is completely different. Hamlet continues to postpone the murder of the King, whereas Laertes would kill the Prince anywhere and at any time.

Furthermore, the third chapter focuses on the relation between Laertes and Ophelia. She is used to obey male figures, such as her father Polonius, like the typical Elizabethan woman. Laertes seems to behave like his father who tries to control Ophe-

lia's sexuality. This is the reason why people may think that Laertes suffers from the Oedipus Complex since he seems to be jealous of Ophelia and to control her in every situation.

However, I do not believe in the Oedipus Complex either for Hamlet or for Laertes. From my point of view, Jones' idea is extremely interesting and fascinating, but it is an interpretation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which does not take into consideration all the theological and political meanings of *Hamlet*.



## Chapter 1: *The psychoanalytical interpretation of Hamlet*

### 1.1. Freud's hypothesis

Sigmund Freud was born on 6 May 1856 in Freiberg, Moravia, in the Austrian Empire. After graduating in medicine, he soon started to analyse the presence of powerful mental processes outside the control of the conscious in people's minds. Through his clinical work with patients suffering from hysteria and other neurotic disorders, he developed his theory of psychoanalysis, which revolutionised the understanding of human psychology.<sup>1</sup>

One of his most famous works, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, completed in 1899 and published in the following year, explores the meaning of dreams, which tend to reveal unconscious thoughts and passions.<sup>2</sup> In chapter five, Freud described children's attitudes towards death and parents. Children do not understand death as adults do – they simply realise that a dead man<sup>3</sup> is no longer in our physical world and he will never return here.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they have a sexual instinct from a very young age towards the parents of the opposite sex – the boy tends to prefer the mother with the consequent hatred towards the rival, for instance the father. For this reason, the boy could desire his father's death because it is seen as a sort of absence in which he could better enjoy the presence of his own mother.<sup>5</sup> Freud proposed the example of a child who sleeps in the same bed as the mother while the father is abroad. When he returns, he only desires him

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sigmund-freud/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sigmund-freud/>.

<sup>3</sup> Freud only referred to men while describing the Oedipus Complex. It is for this reason that I decided not to talk about women. It was Carl Gustav Jung, one of Freud's followers, who proposed a feminine perspective. He described the Electra Complex referring to mother-daughter relations (Willner, Dorothy, "The Oedipus Complex, Antigone, and Electra: The Woman as Hero and Victim", *American Anthropologist*, 84 (1982), p. 69).

<sup>4</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *L'Interpretazione dei Sogni*, translated by Elvio Fachinelli and Herma Trettl, Torino: Boringhieri, 1973, pp. 241-42.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, p. 243.

to go away again and one of the instruments which can grant it is death. Another typical case is the girl who asks the father to marry her and the mother to leave him:

A particularly clever and lively little girl, not yet four years of age, in whom this trait of child psychology is unusually transparent, says frankly: "Now mummy can go away; then daddy must marry me, and I will be his wife". Nor does this wish by any means exclude the possibility that the child may most tenderly love its mother. If the little boy is allowed to sleep at his mother's side whenever his father goes on a journey, and if after his father's return he has to go back to the nursery, to a person whom he likes far less, the wish may readily arise that his father might always be absent, so that he might keep his place beside his dear, beautiful mamma; and the father's death is obviously a means for the attainment of this wish; for the child's experience has taught him that dead folks, like grandpapa, for example, are always absent; they never come back.<sup>6</sup>

This process is denominated by Freud Oedipus Complex, since the fulfilment of these childish desires is incarnated by Oedipus the King, the son of King Laius and Jocasta. In Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus has been abandoned by his parents because the Oracle predicted that he would have killed his father and married his mother. He is saved and grows up away from his homeland aware of his destiny. However, he meets Laius and, without knowing the latter's identity, he kills him during a fight. He also marries Jocasta and gives birth to two sons and two daughters. The final tragedy plays around the fact that Oedipus has to leave the town in order to put an end to a pestilence.<sup>7</sup>

Freud wrote that Oedipus' destiny can be shared by anyone since, metaphorically, the oracle has given us the same instincts, as loving the mother and hating the father, which are mainly expressed in dreams. While growing, men have learnt to contain their impulses since repression is fundamental in order to live in a more stable society, although some internal conflicts repressed in the unconscious may affect adulthood. In spite of this, there are particular cases such as the psychoneurotics who have difficulties in controlling their passions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Freud, pp. 244-45. This is the translation I use throughout: <https://www.psywww.com/books/interp/> – Chapter 5, Section D, "Authority of the father".

<sup>7</sup> Freud, p. 247.

<sup>8</sup> Freud, p. 248.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the author analysed the tragedy of *Hamlet*,<sup>9</sup> focusing more on Gertrude and on the desire rather than the plot and the thought<sup>10</sup>. Freud considered William Shakespeare “the greatest of poets”<sup>11</sup> particularly admiring “Shakespeare’s power of expression and his insights into human nature”.<sup>12</sup> In the play, the protagonist seems incapable of performing his task, which is killing Claudius for the murder of his father. The tragedy revolves around the death of Old Hamlet, who appears as a ghost to his son revealing that he has been killed by his brother Claudius who wants to take the throne while marrying his mother, Gertrude. For this reason, he asks Hamlet to seek vengeance for these betrayals. However, the Prince continues to postpone his duty and the hesitancy in avenging his father is considered one of the greatest mysteries in literature, the so-called “Sphinx of Modern Literature”.<sup>13</sup> This can be demonstrated by the episode in which he has the possibility to kill his uncle but he puts up his sword:

HAMLET: Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hint.  
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
 Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
 At gaming swearing, or about some act  
 That has no relish of salvation in’t –  
 Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,  
 And that his soul may be as damned and black  
 As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.  
 This physic but prolongs thy sickly days (3,3, 88-96).<sup>14</sup>

According to some critics, this is simply an excuse to delay the murder Hamlet should commit. However, Claudius has just confessed his guilt while he is praying, and it is probably for this reason that the Prince does not stab him.<sup>15</sup> He prefers to kill his uncle in “some act that has no relish of salvation in’t” (3,3, 91-92) since, if someone dies

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<sup>9</sup> Freud, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Camerlingo, Rosanna, *Crimini e Peccati. La Confessione al Tempo di Amleto*, Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2014, p. XIV.

<sup>11</sup> Holland, Norman, “Freud on Shakespeare”, *PMLA*, 75 (1960), p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Holland, p. 163.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, Ernest, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, New York: Norton, 1949, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, edited by G.R. Hibbard, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. This is the edition I use throughout.

<sup>15</sup> Camerlingo, p. 134: according to her, Freud did not consider the theological and political context of the tragedy, while he simply focused on Hamlet’s repressed desires.

while praying, he will surely go to Heaven. In 1215, after the Lateran Council, Catholics were obliged to confess at least once a year. In this way, confession became a private ritual and it was fundamental for a person to free himself from any crimes. On the other hand, Luther considered confession a political instrument and, for this reason, it was deleted by the protestant Church. This removal created a complete emptiness of traditions and customs. According to Rosanna Camerlingo, Shakespeare knew this religious conflict and he wanted to represent a reality which surrounded England during his times. People really believed in this ritual and in the possibility of purification through prayers, and for this reason Hamlet decides not to act.<sup>16</sup>

Many authors have tried to analyse the meaning of Hamlet's inaction. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1795, in the novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*,<sup>17</sup> considered Hamlet an over-sensitive person paralysed by his thoughts<sup>18</sup>. Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1808 in *Lectures on Shakespeare* talked about an "overbalance in the contemplative faculty"<sup>19</sup> which means that "Hamlet, for temperamental reasons, was inherently incapable of decisive actions of any kind".<sup>20</sup> In 1916 William Hazlitt argued that "his ruling passion is to think, not to act: and any vague pretence that flatters this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes"<sup>21</sup> – Hamlet "is not a character marked by strength or will or even of passion, but by a refinement of thought and sentiment".<sup>22</sup> Freud saw in the particular nature of the task<sup>23</sup> the cause of the paralysis since Hamlet shows the ability to act in a violent way in different situations, first of all when he stabs Polonius in Gertrude's chamber and secondly when he sends to death both Rosencranz

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<sup>16</sup> Camerlingo pp. XIX-XX.

<sup>17</sup> The original title is *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Jones, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Jones, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Jones, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Hazlitt, William, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, London: Oxford University Press, 1916, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> Hazlitt, p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> Freud, p. 251.

and Guildenstern. First of all, Hamlet thinks that there is Claudius behind the arras and for this reason he stabs him. In his mind the murder of his uncle has taken place and this proves that he is able to seek revenge. Furthermore, the dialogue between Hamlet and Horatio in act 5, scene 2 disproves the idea that Hamlet acts impulsively and without thinking. The Prince describes all the procedures he has performed in order to kill the two courtiers and I see in it a great premeditation and organisation.

In Freud's version of Oedipus, the child's wishful phantasy is brought into the open and realised as it would be in a dream, while in *Hamlet* it remains repressed:

Another of the great poetic tragedies, Shakespeare's Hamlet, is rooted in the same soil as Oedipus Rex. But the whole difference in the psychic life of the two widely separated periods of civilization, and the progress, during the course of time, of repression in the emotional life of humanity, is manifested in the differing treatment of the same material. In Oedipus Rex the basic wish-phantasy of the child is brought to light and realized as it is in dreams; in Hamlet it remains repressed, and we learn of its existence – as we discover the relevant facts in a neurosis – only through the inhibitory effects which proceed from it.<sup>24</sup>

Freud's argument shows that Hamlet does not act only with the person who has killed his father and married his mother, which could represent his childish repressed desire. From this point of view, Hamlet suffers from the Oedipus Complex since he is jealous of Gertrude and consequently unable to kill Claudius who seems to represent what he would like to be. Jones wrote in his work:

The long "repressed" desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection is stimulated to unconscious activity by the sight of someone usurping this place exactly as he himself had once longed to do. More, this someone was a member of the same family, so that the actual usurpation further resembled the imaginary one in being incestuous.<sup>25</sup>

The Oedipus Complex can be symbolised by the scene set in Gertrude's chamber because it represents Hamlet's will to substitute his father in his mother's own bed. Hamlet goes to Gertrude's chamber in order to discuss her choice of marrying Claudius. During the conversation, he hears a noise behind the tapestry and, thinking it is Claudi-

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<sup>24</sup> Freud, p. 250.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, p. 82.

us, stabs it. In reality, he kills Polonius who was eavesdropping on their discussion. It is a fundamental scene because it adds chaos in the Danish court.

POLONIUS: My lord, he's going to his mother's closet.  
Behind the arras I'll convey myself  
To hear the process. I'll warrant she'll tax him home (3,3, 27-29).

It is important to state that this is just one of the interpretations of the play and that it appeared many centuries after Elizabethan times; the audience ought to be Shakespeare's direct readership. I strongly agree with the American literary critic Norman Holland who writes that "Hamlet seems almost to have helped Freud formulate the conception of the Oedipus complex which turned out to be the cornerstone of orthodox psychoanalysis".<sup>26</sup> This expression proves that some critics tried to define Hamlet's disorder in order to simply prove or formulate their studies – however this was not Shakespeare's aim, as Dover Wilson pointed out:

Had Shakespeare been composing *Hamlet* to-day, he might conceivably have given us a hint of such an infantile complex. But he knew nothing of these matters and to write as if he did is to beat the air.<sup>27</sup>

### **1.2. *Hamlet and Oedipus* by Ernest Jones**

In this section, I decided to focus mainly on Ernest Jones' work *Hamlet and Oedipus*. I have tried to propose a summary which can exemplify his thoughts and interpretation of *Hamlet*, even if at the end I advanced a critique.

Ernest Jones, one of Freud's most brilliant followers and closest associates, was born in 1879 in Glamorgan and died in 1958 in London. They first met in 1906 during one of Freud's lectures in London.<sup>28</sup> Influenced by the father of psychoanalysis, he began studying Hamlet's possible psychological condition. This study initially appeared in the article "The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery" in *The*

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<sup>26</sup> Holland, p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, J. Dover, *What Happens in Hamlet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ernest-jones\\_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ernest-jones_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/).

*American Journal of Psychology* in 1910. In 1923 the article was revised and extended into “A Psycho-Analytic Study of Hamlet”, which later became the first chapter of the work *Hamlet and Oedipus*, published in 1949.<sup>29</sup>

*Hamlet and Oedipus* mainly discusses the meaning of Hamlet’s conflicts and sufferings which have a psycho-pathological nature<sup>30</sup> – as the protagonist says, “in my heart there was a kind of fighting that would not let me sleep” (5,2, 4-5). For this purpose, the author pretended that Hamlet is a living person with a past and a story before the beginning of the play, while trying to forget he is a creation of Shakespeare. The concept of the living character was typical of late nineteenth-century criticism and it refers to a figure who continued to resonate in the reader’s imagination even after the end of the book.<sup>31</sup> The first writer who proposed this procedure was Goethe who wondered how Hamlet had been before all his misfortunes.<sup>32</sup> Psychologists themselves tend to study a patient’s behaviour before the events put under observation because what has previously happened may have influenced the present problems. An example is the reference to Hamlet’s studies in Wittenberg; humanism and philosophy of Wittenberg have been considered by various scholars responsible for his inaction:<sup>33</sup>

CLAUDIUS: For your intent  
In going back to school in Wittenberg,  
It is most retrograde to our desire,  
And we beseech you bend you to remain  
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,  
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son (1,2, 112-117).

Jones described Hamlet as a “strong man tortured by some mysterious inhibition”<sup>34</sup> since he shows determination in different situations – beside the killing of the counsel-

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Murray, Nathan, “Hamlet and Character in Modernist Criticism”, *The Review of English Studies*, 71 (2020), p. 953.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Jones, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> An example is Konrad Meier who wrote *Klassisches in Hamlet* in 1907, quoted in Jones, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, p. 34.

lor and of his friends, he is not afraid of meeting the ghost of his father or of mocking Ophelia. Furthermore, Hamlet should justify his action to the people because Claudius's crime is too unnatural to be believed.

If Hamlet had simply slain his uncle, and then proclaimed, without a shred of supporting evidence, that he had done it to avenge a fratricide, the nation would infallibly have cried out upon him, not only for murdering his uncle to seize the throne himself, but also for selfishly seeking to cast an infamous slur on the memory of a man who could no longer defend his honour.<sup>35</sup>

This can be considered the consequence of Shakespeare's intention to transform "the play from an external struggle into an internal tragedy"<sup>36</sup> since in Saxo Grammaticus's *Hamlet Legend*,<sup>37</sup> Claudius has killed the King in public:

In the saga Feng (Claudius) had murdered his brother in public, so that the deed was generally known, and further had with lies and false witnesses sought to justify the deed by pretending it was done to save the Queen from the cruel threats of her husband.<sup>38</sup>

The idea that Hamlet cannot act because he needs to show concrete evidence of the deed can be supported by the citizens' love towards him. It makes me think that people would prefer the Prince of Denmark rather than the current King and it is exemplified in the two following scenes. Probably if he had killed the King, all the admiration people had in him would have waned. Moreover, Hamlet wanted to "preserve the crown as far as possible from public scandal"<sup>39</sup> since in his times "the whole social structure seemed to depend upon the dignity and integrity of the royal house and of the noble families surrounding and supporting it".<sup>40</sup>

CLAUDIUS: Yet must not we put the strong law on him.  
He's loved of the distracted multitude,  
Who like not in their judgement but their eyes;  
And where 'tis so, th'offender's scourge is weighed,  
But never the offence (4,3, 3-7).

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<sup>35</sup> Jones, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, p. 153.

<sup>37</sup> Shakespeare, p. 6: Saxo Grammaticus was a Danish author who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote *Historiae Danicae* in which Hamlet's legend appears and this is a fundamental source from which Shakespeare drew inspiration. In Saxo Grammaticus, Claudius is named Feng while Old Hamlet is Horwendill.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, p. 152.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson, D., p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, D., p. 49.



CLAUDIUS: The other motive,  
Why to a public count I might not go,  
Is the great love general gender bear him,  
Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,  
Would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone,  
Convert his guilts to graces (4,7, 16-21).

Ernest Jones supported the ideas of the German philosopher Hermann Ulrici presented in *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art* in 1839. He thought that Hamlet was not aware of the nature of the revenge probably because Shakespeare himself was unaware of the problem, the reason why it was not expressed clearly in the text. Jones wrote that:

Hamlet's hesitancy may have been due to an internal conflict between the impulse to fulfil his task on the one hand and some special cause of repugnance to it on the other; further, the explanation of his not disclosing this cause of repugnance may be that he was not conscious of its nature; and yet the cause may be one that doesn't happen to have been considered by any of the upholders of this hypothesis.<sup>41</sup>

In this regard, T. S. Eliot, in *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, talked about the play as “an artistic failure”<sup>42</sup> because readers try to “understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself”.<sup>43</sup> The protagonist of the tragedy has had various possibilities in which he could clarify what was going on in his own mind, as during his most famous soliloquy “to be or not to be” (3,1, 57), but he preferred to remain silent about it. I do not agree with this hypothesis because I think that Shakespeare was extremely aware of what he was writing. The fact that nowadays some passages and details are more difficult to understand, for example the episode in which Hamlet puts up his sword and does not kill his uncle, is the consequence of the period in which we live which is completely different from the Elizabethan times.

In addition, Jones also supposed that the reason of the Prince's vacillation lay “in some special feature of the task that renders it repugnant to him”.<sup>44</sup> He talked about a “specific aboulia due to an unconscious repulsion against the act that cannot be per-

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<sup>41</sup> Jones, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Eliot, T.S., “Hamlet and his Problems”, in *The Sacred Wood, Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1920, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> Eliot, p. 103.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, p. 45.

formed”,<sup>45</sup> which means that a part of Hamlet unconsciously does not want to perform the task in spite of what he should do.

This inner conflict can derive from the repression of Hamlet’s infantile jealousy of his own father, whose death could have caused these repressed memories to reappear. As Freud hypothesized, the jealousy felt by a boy towards the mother is the typical example of the so-called Oedipus Complex<sup>46</sup>. Generally speaking, an intensive repression of the desire could lead to misogyny or homosexuality, since the child would compare all women to his mother, who is forbidden. On the other hand, if this is insufficiently repressed, the boy could be abnormally attached to his mother or could only love women similar to her.<sup>47</sup> The second option can be embodied by Hamlet himself. In fact, while reading *Hamlet*, we understand that he has loved Ophelia probably before the beginning of the play and some authors, such as Goethe, think that she resembles his mother whose sexuality is highlighted in the tragedy. The various attacks that Ophelia receives demonstrate the reawakening of the old conflict which leads to a sort of misogyny, a theme that has to be understood within the historical context because Elizabethan society had rigid gender roles and expectations: “gentlewomen were expected to display the virtues of silence and housekeeping”.<sup>48</sup> Here are some examples of the Prince’s behaviour towards her: she is criticised for moving in an “exaggeratedly smooth and fluid fashion” and for “making up fancy names for creatures that were given their proper names by Adam”.<sup>49</sup> He even asks her to go to a brothel:

HAMLET: I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourself another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, and nickname God’s creatures, and make your wan-

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<sup>45</sup> Jones, pp. 52-3.

<sup>46</sup> As Freud did in his work, Jones only described the Oedipus Complex from a masculine point of view. He did not mention the relation between a girl and her father.

<sup>47</sup> Jones, pp. 77-8.

<sup>48</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen, “The Sixteenth Century” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Norton & Company: New York, 2012, p. 541.

<sup>49</sup> Shakespeare, p. 244-45.

tonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriages. Those that are married already – all but one – shall live. The rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go (3,1, 143-150).

The theme of misogyny can be also identified in his relation with Gertrude who is repeatedly criticised for what she has done after Old Hamlet's death – these following episodes are symbolic. The first is taken from the first soliloquy of Hamlet, in which I perceive his anti-feminist perspective since he considers the woman fragile and without the ability to reason logically. Moreover, he accuses her of incest because marrying a dead husband's brother was forbidden by the Church, both Catholic and Protestant.<sup>50</sup> The latter is set in Gertrude's chamber, the symbol of the Oedipus Complex, because it is the most private place for a woman. He accuses her of adultery and hypocrisy since she has made false marriage vows. In addition, the person who kills Hamlet's rival – his father – is a near relative who has committed two frightful crimes, both the murder and the incest:

The uncle has not merely committed *each* crime, he has committed *both* crimes, a distinction of considerable importance, since the *combination* of crimes allows the admittance of a new factor, produced by the possible inter-relation of the two, which may prevent the result from being simply one of summation. In addition, it has to be borne in mind that the perpetrator of the crimes is a relative, and an exceedingly near relative.<sup>51</sup>

Hamlet is completely horrified by these deeds and he talks about them using harsh words – “A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king and marry with his brother” (4,4, 29-30). Another example is proposed when Hamlet forces his uncle to drink from the poisonous cup at the end of the play: “Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane, drink off this potion” (5,2, 77-78). Claudius is even defined “that incestuous, that adulterate beast” (1,5, 41) by the ghost when he first meets his son at the beginning of the tragedy.

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<sup>50</sup> Shakespeare, p. 164.

<sup>51</sup> Jones, p. 61.

Hamlet cannot kill the King who probably represents what and where he would like to be – he being identified with his uncle: “his uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself”.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, it would also mean killing his mother’s husband.

Jones wrote in his work, “the main theme of this story is a highly elaborated and disguised account of a boy’s love for his mother and consequent jealousy of and hatred towards his father”.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the following statement perfectly describes Hamlet’s condition:

We find it hard, with Shakespeare’s help, to understand Hamlet: even Shakespeare, perhaps, found it hard to understand him: Hamlet himself finds it impossible to understand himself. Better able than other men to read his own”.<sup>54</sup>

In my opinion, Ernest Jones’ analysis lacks completeness, since he did not analyse the theological and political backgrounds of *Hamlet*. He did not consider the time in which the play was written and he avoided Shakespeare’s own point of view, according to which Hamlet is surrounded by circumstances which paralyse him. As I previously explained, one reason for his inaction is the religious factor, since he wants Claudius to go to Hell. Furthermore, Shakespeare did not know psychoanalysis and he could not create a character following these terms. As Dover Wilson pointed out:

To abstract one figure from an elaborate dramatic composition and study it as a case in the psychoanalytical clinic is to attempt something at once wrong in method and futile in aim.<sup>55</sup>

He continued:

It is entirely misleading to attempt to describe Hamlet’s state of mind in terms of modern psychology at all, not merely because Shakespeare did not think in these terms, but because – once again – Hamlet is a character in a play, not in history.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jones, p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, p. 143.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, p. 50.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson, D., p. VII.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson, D., p. 218.

Nevertheless, I think that Jones' hypothesis is incredibly interesting and fascinating, especially for modern readers and for cinematographic rewritings, such as the movie of Laurence Olivier that I will discuss next.

### 1.3. *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier

Laurence Kerr Olivier was born on 22 May 1907 in Dorking (UK) during the Edwardian age, a period in which actors, music-hall artists and playwrights started to be largely supported. His excellent ability in oratory and acting was manifested in All Saints School when he embodied Brutus role in *Julius Caesar*<sup>57</sup> – this was probably his first approach with Shakespeare's works. After this performance, the internationally renowned actress of the time, Ellen Terry, described Olivier as a born actor<sup>58</sup>. Olivier got a scholarship at the Central School where he performed, among all, *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note how Olivier had been in touch with Shakespeare's works throughout all his life and probably it is not by chance that he had later directed the film adaptation of *Hamlet*.

His first encounter with the tragedy of *Hamlet* occurred when he appeared in a production directed by Tyrone Guthrie and premiered on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 1937 at the Old Vic.<sup>60</sup> His deep appreciation for realism was evident during the duel with Laertes – played by the actor Michael Redgrave – since he was injured.<sup>61</sup> The director drew inspiration from Freud and Ernest Jones's psychoanalytical interpretation of the text influencing Olivier himself who acted following these lines. In fact, his character was strong

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<sup>57</sup> Spoto, p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> Spoto, p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> Spoto, pp. 50-1.

<sup>60</sup> Spoto, p. 137.

<sup>61</sup> Spoto, p. 143.

and resolute, he had shaved his hair on the temples and his eyebrows were thinned.<sup>62</sup> He even met Jones in his studio in Regent's Park for textual analysis.<sup>63</sup>

Critics regarded Olivier as a great actor due to his talent to embody the various Shakespearean roles such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo, Coriolanus, and others. His personal experiences, including the loss of his mother, his brother's life abroad and his difficulties in marriage due to his homosexuality, gave him an insight into the emotions and struggles these characters might have faced in real life.<sup>64</sup> Laurence Olivier's international success was marked by the movie *Henry V* which appeared in 1944 in London and gained him an Oscar.<sup>65</sup>

He started filming *Hamlet*<sup>66</sup> in April 1947 in the British Denham studios and it was completed the following year. Since the original play is extremely long, Olivier decided to shorten the tragedy cutting many parts of the plot such as the characters of Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – the idea of deleting the political plot is the direct consequence of the historical period characterised by the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust.<sup>67</sup> While in the original there are other locations, the movie is completely set in Elsinore castle. This creates a sense of claustrophobia<sup>68</sup>. I consider this thematic element as the mirror of Hamlet's paralysis – he cannot act in a location which seems to crush both his body and his mind.

Olivier was obsessed with realism in his performances as an actor, so that Hamlet, represented by Olivier, had to throw himself from a height of about four metres to

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<sup>62</sup> Spoto, p. 142.

<sup>63</sup> Olivier, p. 88.

<sup>64</sup> Spoto, p. 161.

<sup>65</sup> Spoto, p. 228.

<sup>66</sup> *Hamlet* (1948), directed by Laurence Olivier, with Laurence Olivier, Eileen Herlie, Basil Sydney, Felix Aylmer, Jean Simmons, Terence Morgan, music by William Walton, photography by Desmond Dickinson.

<sup>67</sup> Gunter, J. Lawrence, "Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear on Film", in *Shakespeare on Film*, edited by Russell Jackson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 122.

<sup>68</sup> Davies, Anthony, "Laurence Olivier's Hamlet", in *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 40.

kill Claudius; the actor impersonating Claudius fell losing consciousness and two teeth during the shooting.<sup>69</sup> In addition, “Olivier dyes his hair blond so as to portray the archetype Dane”.<sup>70</sup> The decision to film in black and white created a more dramatic atmosphere, emphasising the complexity and darkness of the characters. I think that the pathos created by this atmosphere has been also conveyed through the massive use of fog which surrounds the Castle of Elsinore and the ghost himself. Furthermore, Hamlet is often lost in his thoughts – we hear his voice in the background but he does not move his lips, as in the case of the “to be or not to be” soliloquy which is filmed outside the palace on the upper ramparts. The scene represents his symbolic castration as he drops the dagger into the sea and it also highlights the Prince’s need for isolation and privacy and, for this reason, he questions himself in a place where nobody can follow him:

It is fitting that Hamlet should address the question to himself in a place where his isolation and privacy are guaranteed, a place to which even his trusted friends did not follow him before. For this soliloquy reveals an imaginative involvement with issues beyond the immediate domestic or political preoccupations, and it is an imaginative encounter with ultimate choice, of which no one else in the play is capable.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, “the vertical dimensions of the film’s movement constitute a spatial articulation of both the moral and the psychological structure of Olivier’s adaptation”.<sup>72</sup> This can be seen in the architecture of the castle itself which is characterised by several upper ramparts and stairs. Lawrence Guntner considered the stairs as “bridges between appearance and reality, normalcy and the abyss of the human soul, the conscious and the subconscious, and they provide acting space for the agile Olivier”.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Spoto, p. 257.

<sup>70</sup> Zlatkin, Rachel, “Olivier’s Hamlet: A Creature Swimming”, *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*, 3 (2009), <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=spovsc>, p. 38.

<sup>71</sup> Davies, “Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet*”, p. 53.

<sup>72</sup> Davies, “Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet*”, p. 53.

<sup>73</sup> Guntner, p. 123.

“This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind”<sup>74</sup> is a fundamental statement made by Olivier towards the beginning of the movie. It is really important and it has an ideological connotation, so that our interpretation of the movie is based on this statement. The Prince’s psyche mirrors the state of Denmark which is, above all, a prison for the mind. As Donald Spoto pointed out, this movie completely explores the mind of a man struggling for his relationships with women.<sup>75</sup> Scholars talk about an Oedipal cinempoem,<sup>76</sup> and it is not by chance that the role of Gertrude was embodied by Eileen Herlie, who was much younger than Olivier,<sup>77</sup> who impersonated her son. Her sexuality is greatly underlined – she represents a beautiful mother towards whom Hamlet can drive his passions. In fact, the kiss between Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet scene does not shock the public. They appear as an ordinary couple sharing their love for each other.

There are two passages set in her closet which can both symbolise her sexual appeal and the presence of Oedipal allusions such as the uterus-shaped oversized bed which seems to dominate the scene. It first appears at the beginning of the movie, before the King’s proclamation, without explanations and without people on it – it is symbolic because it makes us realise it will have an important role throughout the drama. Robert Duffy<sup>78</sup> even identified sexuality in the repetition of round shapes “in those compositions which connect Gertrude with her environment”,<sup>79</sup> such as the canopy of the bed, the form of her dress when she sits and the tapestry of the wall. Hamlet at first does not seem convinced to go to his mother’s bedroom – from my point of view this is due to

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<sup>74</sup> *Hamlet*, Minute 2.44.

<sup>75</sup> Spoto, p. 258.

<sup>76</sup> Davies, Anthony, “The Shakespeare Films of Laurence Olivier”, in *Shakespeare on Film*, edited by Russell Jackson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 175.

<sup>77</sup> Weller, Philip, “Freud’s Footprints in Films of *Hamlet*”, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 25 (1997), p. 121.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Davies, “Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet*”, p. 40.

<sup>79</sup> Davies, “Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet*”, p. 46.



the fact that confronting her means confronting his own conscience since he should kill her husband. Moreover, Gertrude kisses her son more than once and this is an explicit demonstration of the possible Oedipus Complex. I think that at the beginning of the movie Hamlet seems confused and forced to kiss back his mother, probably because they are in public – however, when they are alone in the closet, we perceive a more passionate kiss. I noted that all the actors in the movie tend to wear dark clothes, except the two women who are dressed in white, the colour of innocence and purity. It could be another paradox since the Queen has committed incest and she cannot be pure.



*Figure 1. Hamlet (Olivier). Gertrude's bedchamber.*

Despite the inaction, the Oedipus Complex can be identified in the cruel way Hamlet treats both Ophelia and love in general and in his changing moods. He shows great bravery while following the ghost in the battlements, but then he starts to sweat. He is angry and he wants revenge, but he seems paralysed. He acts in the same way with Ophelia – he grasps her wrist forcefully, then he embraces her, sighs and finally lets her go. In another scene, he tells her to go to a nunnery in a calm tone, despite the brutality of the expression, and kisses her hand – I think here he knows he is overheard by Polonius and the King because he repeatedly looks and points at the curtain.

*Hamlet* won four Oscars, including the ones for the best actor and movie, and it was elected as the best film by the British Film Academy and the Venice Film Festival<sup>80</sup>. It has been defined:

A complex journey with moral, psychological and philosophical dimensions [...] We are left with the assurance that human worth and dignity have been sacrificed in order to allow for the possibility of a better world.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Spoto, p. 259.

<sup>81</sup> Davies, "Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*", p. 43.

## Chapter 2: *Hamlet and Laertes*

### 2.1. Laertes as Hamlet's double

Laertes – Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother – is a significant character in *Hamlet*. He shows the traits of an impetuous soldier and manages a violent plan with Claudius to kill Hamlet.<sup>82</sup> Critics agree in considering Laertes the double of the Prince since they both have a dead father to avenge, even if they behave differently – “Laertes, like Hamlet, has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him”.<sup>83</sup> The theme of the double is extremely widespread in *Hamlet*, where each character and action have a sort of mirror – according to Frank Kermode, the tragedy is “obsessed with doubles of all kinds”.<sup>84</sup> In addition Ernest Jones writes that the doubling highlights the significance of the main characters, particularly to elevate the central hero:

The doubling seems to be the desire to exalt the importance of the principal characters, and especially to glorify the hero, by decoratively filling in the stage with lay figures of colourless copies whose natural movements contrast with the vivid activities of the principals.<sup>85</sup>

The most evident example is represented by the play-within-the-play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, since the inhabitants of Elsinore castle can identify themselves with the actors.<sup>86</sup> The role of the villain who mirrors Claudius is symbolic because it makes him confess his deeds. He can even mirror himself in his dead brother, former King, and Gertrude's husband. Gertrude can be compared both with the actress during the play and with Ophelia with whom she shares the love and respect towards what may be considered a wrong man – respectively Claudius and Polonius. While the relation between Claudius and Gertrude might be seen as inappropriate, owing to the incest, the one be-

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<sup>82</sup> Coronato, Rocco, *Shakespeare: Guida ad Amleto*, Roma: Carocci, 2021, p. 37.

<sup>83</sup> Bradley A.C., quoted in Wilson, Jeffrey, “Tragic Excess in *Hamlet*”, *Literary Imagination*, 21 (2019), p. 108.

<sup>84</sup> Kermode, Frank, quoted in Gibson, Rex, *Hamlet/Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 78.

<sup>85</sup> Jones, p. 141.

<sup>86</sup> Coronato, pp. 76-7.

tween Ophelia and Polonius reflects the typical father-daughter bond of the time. Modern readers may perceive their relation as characterised by an excessive control on women. The Counsellor, in fact, tells his daughter how to behave and what to think, transforming her into a “father’s puppet”.<sup>87</sup> However Polonius – as the typical Elizabethan head of the family – gives orders to all the members of his family – Laertes, Ophelia and the Servant Reynoldo. The Elizabethan audience could perceive the parallelism between *The Murder of Gonzago* and Claudius’ crime with no difficulty. In fact, the play is extremely detailed and precise: “The garden scene, the afternoon nap, the nature of the drug, the method of the poisoning, the wooing of the queen, the seizure of the crown: all are duplicated”.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Hamlet and Ophelia even share the pain for the death of a parent.<sup>89</sup> Another example of the doubling regards the two main families of the play. In fact, the entire Hamlet family is mirrored by the Polonius one, and everyone seems to be counterbalanced by someone else, as pointed out in the following quotation:

Both fathers haunt their sons, one literally, the other with spies. Innocent Ophelia counterbalances frail Gertrude; the taciturn university friend Horatio counterbalances the wordy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet praises Horatio as a model of judgement, no pipe for fortune’s finger, and in the next scene mocks Rosencrantz for trying to play him like a recorder. Later Horatio stands quietly at Hamlet’s side while he mocks Osric, the chough in peacock’s clothes spacious in land and words. In the duel Osric seconds Laertes, both wordy men like their master Claudius, while student Horatio seconds student Hamlet. The central characters form a double pattern.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, the doubling can be identified in various couples which always appear together in the play. Beside the two English ambassadors Cornelius and Voltmand, an interesting pair is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – the two spies whose names might be exchanged by the King: “Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern – Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz” (2,2, 33-34). In this passage, it seems to be suggested that the King confuses them and therefore calls them with the reversed names, while

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<sup>87</sup> Nardo, Anna K., “Hamlet, a Man to Double Business Bold”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 34 (1983), p. 193.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, D., pp. 140-41.

<sup>89</sup> Coronato, p. 78.

<sup>90</sup> Gurr, Andrew, *Hamlet and the Distracted Globe*, Eastbourne: Sussex University Press, 1978, pp. 23-4.

Gertrude replies by calling them correctly. Hamlet himself has two different sides. When he is with the soldiers or with Horatio, he behaves as the ideal Renaissance prince – he is “gracious in manner, curious and precise as befits a scholar, soldierly in his resolution and readiness to make a decision”.<sup>91</sup> For example, he is determined to follow the ghost in the battlements. On the other hand, when he is in the court, “he is bitter, suspicious, and above all, disillusioned”,<sup>92</sup> especially towards Claudius.

In the tragedy there is even a mirror which can highlight the concept of the double. It is in the scene set in Gertrude’s closet. The mirror is the metaphor for knowledge, and it is used by Hamlet to make her look at herself, as he says: “Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge, you go not till I set up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you” (3,4, 19-21). A similar idea is conveyed through the Prince’s words referred to Laertes while speaking with Osric. This scene appears in one version of *Hamlet*, in which there are peculiar passages omitted in the modern version.<sup>93</sup> This is the imperfect and bad version of *Hamlet* – Bad Quarto – probably reconstructed from the memory of the actor embodying Marcellus.<sup>94</sup> The Bad Quarto is extremely different from the First Folio – the version people read nowadays – which appeared in 1623. It was edited by Heminges and Condell, the survivors of the Lord Chamberlain’s Company for whom the tragedy was written.<sup>95</sup> The passage points out the contrast between what is shown and what is hidden<sup>96</sup> and that “the only thing that really resembles him is his own image in a looking-glass”.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Shakespeare, p. 47.

<sup>92</sup> Shakespeare, p. 47.

<sup>93</sup> Shakespeare, p. 131.

<sup>94</sup> Shakespeare, p. 76.

<sup>95</sup> Shakespeare, p. 105.

<sup>96</sup> Coronato, p. 83.

<sup>97</sup> Shakespeare, p. 367.

But, in the verity of extolment, I take him to be a soul of great article, and his infusion of such dearth and rareness as, to make true diction of him, his semblance is his mirror, and who else would trace him, his umbrage, nothing more. (5,2, 9-12-appendix A).

There is no reference to Laertes' image in a looking-glass in the First Folio; in this passage Osric and Hamlet are talking about bravery and assiduity of spirit. The element which can be found both in the First Folio and in the Bad Quarto is Laertes' excellence at his weapons, which are the "rapier and dagger" (5,2, 110).

The character of Laertes, like Fortinbras, is not present in historical sources such as the ones of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest. In fact, it is probably introduced in *Hamlet* by Shakespeare with the aim to provide a contrast to Hamlet's behaviour and to add details to the plot – "It will become apparent that Fortinbras and Laertes here lead up to Hamlet because their situations are designed to reflect his",<sup>98</sup> and "they complement rather than duplicate one another".<sup>99</sup> The presence of a pious son who wants to avenge his dead father – Polonius – shows what the Prince should do. Moreover, according to Ernest Jones, Laertes has the power to highlight the main character of the tragedy.

The whole Laertes episode seems almost deliberately to have been woven into the drama so as to show the world how a pious son should really deal with his father's murderer, how possible was the vengeance in just these particular circumstances, and by contrast to illuminate the ignoble vacillation of Hamlet, whose honour had been doubly wounded by the same treacherous villain.<sup>100</sup>

In this way, Shakespeare has taken the original material and transformed it into something different: he moved the heart of the tragedy from the revenge towards "the intense human relationships it creates and explores, and, above all, in the hero's struggle with, and reflections on, the world in which he finds himself".<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Jenkins, Harold, "Fortinbras and Laertes and the Composition of Hamlet", in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Carroll Camden*, ed. by J.A. Ward, Houston: Rice University Press, 1974, p. 96.

<sup>99</sup> Jenkins, p. 97.

<sup>100</sup> Jones, p. 38.

<sup>101</sup> Shakespeare, p. 32.

## 2.2. Their similarities and differences

“The devil take thy soul!” (5,1, 249) – this is Laertes’ expression when he meets Hamlet at Ophelia’s graveyard. This scene is the first in which Laertes and Hamlet are seen together – they fight in Ophelia’s grave and this event mirrors the final duel: “It anticipates the terms of the duel to come by the clash with Claudius’s new surrogate and the sight of Claudius behind him”.<sup>102</sup> In fact, the second and last time in which they appear together is the final duel. It is interesting to note that their encounters always end with a fight, highlighting to what extent their relationship is characterised by conflicts and tensions.

First of all, I would like to make a comparison between their descriptions. Hamlet is portrayed by Ophelia as the ideal Renaissance Prince through the list of the roles he was expected to fill and the attributes each role demanded:

OPHELIA: O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!  
The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword;  
Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
Th’observed of all observers – quite, quite down! (3,1, 151-155).

On the other hand, in the Bad Quarto Laertes is described by Osric as a perfect gentleman whose qualities, such as his refined manners and appearance, distinguish him from any other courtier:<sup>103</sup>

OSRIC: Sir, here is newly come to court Laertes. Believe me, an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing. Indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry; for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see (5,2, 1-5, Appendix A).

It is interesting to note that in the First Folio, Osric does not talk about Laertes in this way. The only quality of Laertes which is described in both versions of the tragedy is his excellence at his weapon, as I have previously explained in the chapter.

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<sup>102</sup> Gurr, p. 108.

<sup>103</sup> Shakespeare, p. 366.

Laertes and Hamlet are both described in a positive way, pointing out their qualities as gentlemen. They are “both students, sons, revengers, opponents”,<sup>104</sup> with the same age, family troubles and a similar problem to solve.<sup>105</sup> They both have important private conversations with their fathers. Laertes speaks with Polonius before leaving for Paris and he receives precise instructions on how to behave. Polonius’ aim is to simply give a guide to his son and in my opinion their bond seems to be based on paternal control, the reason why the Counsellor sends Reynoldo to spy on Laertes. This control might seem excessive, but on the part of Laertes there is no mistrust or opposition since it was the typical father-son relation of the time. As I have previously stated, Polonius acts in this way with all the members of his house as the typical head of the family. On the other hand, the Prince meets his father on the battlements and I think that their relation is based on trust: the ghost appears in order to reveal the truth about his murder and to ask for revenge. Death is a central topic in all Shakespearean tragedies and Hamlet and Laertes can be compared even in this theme because they share the same destiny – they die in the same way and at the same time. Laertes precisely says, “I am justly killed with mine own treachery” (5,2, 261) since they change rapiers while fighting and the Prince wounds him with the poisonous sword. In this way “both Hamlet and Laertes achieve their revenge”:<sup>106</sup> “Laertes, as the son of his father, finally fulfills his role by helping Hamlet to fulfill his”.<sup>107</sup>

Despite all the similarities, there are significant differences between these young men, as in the way Claudius refers to them in his first monologue. First of all, his

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<sup>104</sup> Gibson, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup> Wilson, D., p. 263.

<sup>106</sup> Schlueter, June, Lusardi, James P., “Reading *Hamlet* in Performance: The Laertes/Hamlet Connection”, *Shakespearean Illuminations: Essays in Honor of Marvin Rosenberg*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998, p. 52, <http://hdl.handle.net/10385/1207>.

<sup>107</sup> Jenkins, p. 107.



speech may be considered problematic since the King previously talks about foreign policy, addressing Gertude, Fortinbras, Cornelius, Voltemand and then Laertes. He gives the latter his blessing to return to Paris and advises him to enjoy himself while he is young: “Take thy fair hour, Laertes; time be thine, and thy best graces spend it at thy will” (1,2, 62-63). Hamlet is the last character addressed in the speech, but Claudius has no intention of highlighting his position. The Prince is called cousin and then son – “cousin” means kinsman, a concept referring to a relative by blood, excluding parent, child, brother or sister.<sup>108</sup> “But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (1,2, 64). The King simply asks Hamlet the reason why he still dresses in black – which means that he is still grieving and mourning – pointing out that the death of fathers is a common theme. Moreover, in another scene, Laertes is called “our person” (4,5, 120) and the King treats him fondly before giving him the news of Polonius’ death: “More fatherly to Laertes than to his nephew/son, Claudius in 4.5 permits Laertes voice, inviting the furious young man to articulate his wrath so that he may neutralize it”.<sup>109</sup> Both Laertes and Hamlet’s fathers have been killed, the reason why they look for revenge, but I see a great difference in their sufferings. Hamlet’s mourning is true and concrete, as demonstrated by his dressing in black and his general melancholy, while Laertes seems to be simply affected by fashion and appearance,<sup>110</sup> as his speeches point out – “For Hamlet, and the trifling of his flavour, hold it a fashion and a toy in blood” (1,3, 5-6). For example, he is more interested in Polonius’ funeral than in his death – he just talks about the memorial and the ceremony, without thinking about his pain or the reason of death:<sup>111</sup>

LAERTES: Let this be so.

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<sup>108</sup> Shakespeare, p. 158.

<sup>109</sup> Schlueter, p. 53.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, Myron, “Tragic Justice and the House of Polonius”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 8 (1968), p. 280.

<sup>111</sup> Taylor, p. 280.

His means of death, his obscure burial –  
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,  
No noble rite nor formal ostentation –  
Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth,  
That I must call't in question (4,5, 213-218).

Claudius himself, before arranging the duel, wonders about Laertes' feeling towards Polonius. The King even asks Laertes what he would do to show his love for his father, since he needs to completely trust him:

CLAUDIUS: Laertes, was your father dear to you?  
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,  
A face without a heart?  
[...]  
Not that I think you did not love your father,  
But that I know love is begun by time,  
And that I see, in passages of proof,  
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.  
Hamlet comes back. What would you undertake  
To show yourself your father's son in deed  
More than in words? (4,7, 95-102).

The idea that Laertes is interested in appearance and fashion can be identified in the scene at Ophelia's grave in which Laertes repeats twice "What ceremony else?" (5,1, 213), demonstrating his concern in show and not in her soul. On the other hand, Hamlet seems to be truly suffering for his lover's death – "His capacity of love his greater than Laertes' and so therefore is his passion".<sup>112</sup> In his words, I see resentment towards her brother who seems to be criticised for loving Ophelia less than the Prince does. As June Schlueter writes: "Hamlet hyperbolically challenges that love".<sup>113</sup> He challenges Laertes to prove his love suggesting extreme actions such as weeping, fighting, fasting, tearing oneself apart, drinking vinegar and eating a crocodile:

HAMLET: I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum – What wilt thou do for her?  
[...]  
'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.  
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?  
Woo't drink up easel, eat a crocodile? (5,1, 259-266).

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<sup>112</sup> Gurr, p. 75.

<sup>113</sup> Schlueter, p. 55.

At this point, I would like to analyse the nature of the deaths of Old Hamlet and Polonius which may add interesting details to my comparison. The murder of Polonius is known to everyone in Elsinore, while the truth of Old Hamlet's death is obscure.<sup>114</sup> Probably Laertes is able to avenge his father because he does not have to show evidence to people, as Hamlet does, and his anger and wish for revenge are completely legitimised. He even receives great support from Claudius and, as Laertes says while speaking with the King, he has nothing else to lose – in fact, both his sister and his father are dead:

LAERTES: And so have I a noble father lost,  
A sister driven into desp'rate terms,  
Whose worth, if praises may go back again,  
Stood challenger, on mount, of all the age  
For her perfections. But my revenge will come (4,7, 25-29).

Laertes is even unaware of what the King has done, the reason why he completely respects and listens to him.<sup>115</sup> Obviously, Claudius' aim is not to find justice for Laertes, but he simply wants to kill Hamlet. The King manipulates Laertes and drives his anger against the Prince.<sup>116</sup> In this way, Laertes becomes an instrument in Claudius' hands – “Will you be ruled by me?” (4,7, 60). As soon as Hamlet returns to Denmark, the King orchestrates a duel between the two boys. Hamlet is probably stronger in fighting, as he says “Since he went into France, I have been in continual practise. I shall win at the odds” (5,2, 157-158); following Laertes' suggestion to use the poison as a precaution, Claudius puts the poison on Laertes' sword, and he prepares a poisonous cup. The Prince cannot escape death: he will die either way – if he wins the match, by drinking from the cup, if he loses, by the sword. In this way everyone would think that Hamlet's death is an accident and would not suspect anything:

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<sup>114</sup> Camerlingo, p. 142.

<sup>115</sup> Camerlingo, p. 143.

<sup>116</sup> Gurr, p. 35.

CLAUDIUS: I will work him  
To an exploit, now ripe in my device,  
Under the which he shall not choose but fall;  
And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe;  
But even his mother shall uncharge the practise  
And call it accident (4,7, 64-69).

I think it is not by chance that the poison is chosen as a weapon, which is the same instrument used to kill Old Hamlet in the garden. This detail highlights the connection between the two scenes and characters:

An audience's knowledge that poison was the instrument of old Hamlet's murder in the garden and is now to be employed in Claudius and Laertes' design further encourages the connection between these two persuasion sequences, which culminate in pledges of revenge.<sup>117</sup>

Moreover, Laertes is used to following and respecting other people's instructions, as in the dialogue with Polonius who gives to his son some advice before letting him go to Paris. He sends Reynoldo to spy on Laertes giving to the former precise instructions on how to behave – "Reynoldo is sent to find what men say of Laertes, his reputation not his honesty"<sup>118</sup>. In fact, there is a passage taken from the father-son dialogue, in which I perceive Polonius' fondness for fashion and appearance, aspects that I have previously explained while talking about his son:

POLONIUS: Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice.  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement.  
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich not gaudy;  
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
And they in France of the best rank and station  
Are of a most select and generous chief in that (1,3, 68-74).

Another theme I would like to analyse in order to compare Laertes and Hamlet regards the espionage. As Myron Taylor pointed out, "Polonius is practicing the arts of espionage against his own family. He lives in a world of perpetual double-dealing. Appearance has for Polonius become the only reality"<sup>119</sup>. The Counsellor can be compared to Claudius in this aspect, since they both want to control their young men: the King

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<sup>117</sup> Schlueter, pp. 53-4.

<sup>118</sup> Gurr, p. 49.

<sup>119</sup> Taylor, p. 277.

does not let Hamlet return to Wittenberg in order to supervise him, even if he justifies this action saying that the Prince should stay at Elsinore in a cheering and comforting atmosphere – “here in the cheer and comfort of our eye” (1,2, 116). However, he sends him to England when necessary, for instance after the murder of the Counsellor. The theme of espionage is extremely widespread in the tragedy, in which the main characters are spied and they also spy. An example is Hamlet who is controlled by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but he even spies Claudius in order to understand if he has really killed Old Hamlet:

The theme of spying tends to underscore the concern of the play with appearance as opposed to reality. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist for no other reason but to betray Hamlet and to spy upon him. Hamlet and Horatio are using the “Murder of Gonzago” to spy upon Claudius, and Hamlet “spies” upon the King at prayer. But only Polonius has made spying and espionage his whole life.<sup>120</sup>

Another difference between Laertes and Hamlet can be identified in the way they refer to revenge. The former is extremely determined to avenge his father, whereas the latter continues to reflect on how events seem to conspire against him. In the following passage, taken from the bad Quarto, there is the contrast between the aggressiveness and strength of the first case, and lethargy and uncertainty of the second one.<sup>121</sup> Laertes says, “Let come what comes; only I’ll be revenged most thoroughly for my father” (4,5, 135-136), while Hamlet says, “How all occasions do inform against me, and spur my dull revenge” (4,4, 24-25, Appendix A). It is interesting to note that in the First Folio this statement in Act 4, Scene 4 is not present. In the First Folio this scene is extremely different from the one in the Bad Quarto: it is shorter and it is a brief dialogue between Fortinbras and the Captain, with no presence of Hamlet.

Shakespeare was obsessed with the theme of time which can be found even in the analysis of Hamlet and Laertes’ actions. The Prince seems to act slowly, in fact his

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<sup>120</sup> Taylor, p. 276.

<sup>121</sup> Champion, Larry S., “Laertes’ Return to Elsinore”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 17 (1966), p. 82.

revenge takes place after five acts. On the other hand, Laertes is characterised by speed – “Laertes speeds back from France to Denmark to avenge his father’s murder even faster than those currents”<sup>122</sup> – these currents refer to the ocean. Moreover, the term “current” comes from the Latin *currere* and it means running or moving swiftly,<sup>123</sup> underlining again the speed. This is demonstrated by the following passage taken from the meeting between Claudius and the Messenger: “The ocean, overpeering of his list, eats not the flats with more impetuous haste than young Laertes, in a riotous head, o’erbears your officers” (4,5, 96-99). As Jeffrey Wilson pointed out, “If Hamlet’s tragic mistake is moving too slowly, Laertes’s is moving too swiftly”.<sup>124</sup> I think that the concept of quickness is largely shared at Elsinore where the funeral of Old Hamlet is soon forgotten, the funeral of Polonius is barely represented, and Gertude quickly remarries. The only character who truly seems to suffer and think about what has happened is Hamlet.

Another difference can be perceived in the way Hamlet and Laertes talk about the murder they should commit. The Prince is waiting for the perfect moment and he does not kill Claudius while the latter is praying since he wants him to go to Hell, as I have explained in the first chapter. On the other hand, Laertes seems to be only interested in killing Hamlet despite every external condition. In fact, when Claudius asks him “What would you undertake to show yourself your father’s son in deed more than in words?” (4,7, 100-102) he replies, “To cut his throat i’th’ church” (4,7, 103).<sup>125</sup> According to Rosanna Camerlingo, this issue regards the places in which Hamlet and Laertes studied, respectively Wittenberg and Paris. In France politics was more important than confession, and, probably for this reason, Laertes is ready to kill the Prince even in the

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<sup>122</sup> Wilson, J., p. 111.

<sup>123</sup> Wilson, J., p. 110.

<sup>124</sup> Wilson, J., p. 112.

<sup>125</sup> Wilson, D., p. 263.

Church.<sup>126</sup> However, the Elizabethan audience probably did not know all these political and religious details, and, for reason, I think that their different behaviour is due to their personal temperament and external situations – for example the fact that Laertes, unlike Hamlet, does not have to bring evidence to the people.

Beside the meeting at Ophelia's graveyard, the duel is the second and final episode in which Hamlet and Laertes appear together. It is symbolic since Laertes confesses and asks Hamlet for forgiveness:

LAERTES: He is justly served;  
It is a poison tempered by himself.  
Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.  
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,  
Nor thine on me! (5,2, 280-284).

It is not by chance that Laertes behaves in this way at the end of the tragedy, just before dying. When he realises that his conspiracy with Claudius has been discovered by everyone, especially by the Prince, he tries to receive pardon probably in order to go to Heaven, as Hamlet says immediately after: "Heaven make thee free of it!" (5,2, 285). However, "Laertes and Hamlet have more in common than their professed love for the dead Ophelia"<sup>127</sup> – they are also old friends who try to behave better than their previous generation and try to reconcile at least before dying. While Claudius cannot escape Hell, Laertes can still repent and improve his condition. This is a "dishonorable duel of honor that will bring vengeance, forgiveness, and death to them both".<sup>128</sup>

I would like to conclude this chapter with the following statement which points out the relationship between the two young boys, even if, from my point of view, they are not just enemies, but friends separated by external situations, especially caused by the King:

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<sup>126</sup> Camerlingo, p. 144.

<sup>127</sup> Schlueter, p. 56.

<sup>128</sup> Schlueter, p. 61.

Laertes enacts in the play's last scene the role for which he was intended from the beginning. Coming into the play as Polonius's son, he was as revenger to be Hamlet's image but also and ineluctably his enemy.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Jenkins, p. 106.



## Chapter 3: *Laertes and Oedipus*

### 3.1. The relation between Laertes and Ophelia

Ophelia, along with Gertrude, is the only female character in *Hamlet*. She is described as “young, beautiful, artless, innocent and touching”<sup>130</sup> by Hazlitt, even if sometimes she may be simply considered weak. However, she fulfils the typical role of women of the Elizabethan time, during which they were considered inferior and were submitted to male figures: “women’s status and roles were subject to the tyranny of patriarchy (rule by men). Their rights were restricted, legally, socially and economically”.<sup>131</sup> This could be the meaning and reason of her weakness – a topic I will discuss later in the chapter:

Ophelia and Laertes run true to Elizabethan type in their motives and actions and in their relations to one another, to their father and to the royal family that he served.<sup>132</sup>

Ophelia is used to obey to men, such as her father Polonius, as demonstrated by the fact that she calls him “My Lord” (1,3, 99) in the dialogue in which she confesses Hamlet’s love towards her. The Counsellor seems to consider his daughter an inexperienced and innocent girl owing to her age,<sup>133</sup> in fact he addresses her as “green girl” (1,3, 101) and “baby” (1,3, 105) while advising her not to believe Hamlet’s vows. Furthermore, while speaking with Claudius and Gertrude in order to understand the meaning of Hamlet’s madness, Polonius says “I have a daughter – have whilst is mine – who in her duty and obedience, mark, hath given me this” (2,2, 106-108) – this statement may underline the fact that the relationship father-daughter is characterised by obedience and control since Ophelia shares everything that happens to her with Polonius, probably because she is accustomed to doing so.

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<sup>130</sup> Hazlitt, quoted in Draper, John W., “Ophelia and Laertes”, *Philological Quarterly*, 14 (1935), p. 39.

<sup>131</sup> Gibson, p. 72.

<sup>132</sup> Draper, p. 38.

<sup>133</sup> Draper, p. 40.

Given these premises, I would like to compare how Polonius and Laertes behave with Ophelia. First of all, Laertes addresses his sister in a better way than his father: he calls her “my dear sister” (1,3, 33) before his departure to Paris and “dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia” (4,5, 160) when he discovers her madness soon after his return to Elsinore. In fact, as John Draper stated, “the reality of their mutual affection is indubitable”.<sup>134</sup> However, I think that the way Laertes treats Ophelia is simply a mirror of Polonius’ behaviour towards her. Laertes seems to behave as his father does with all the member of his family, giving orders and advice. Ophelia’s sexuality seems to be controlled and even manipulated both by Polonius and Laertes who have just discovered her love affair with Hamlet. Her father wants to use her to prove the Prince’s madness to the King, as he says, “I’ll loose my daughter to him” (2,2, 163) and he asks her not to trust Hamlet. As Gibson pointed out, “Polonius speaks as if she were one of his cattle when he plots to use her as a bait to spy on Hamlet”.<sup>135</sup> Even Laertes thinks that Hamlet’s love is a courtly accomplishment and an amorous impulse, and something which does not last. Moreover:

Laertes is telling Ophelia to be wary of Hamlet because, as is the case with any young man who is maturing physically, the desires of his body overpower the restraining efforts of his conscience.<sup>136</sup>

The following passage taken by the brother-sister dialogue in Act 1, Scene 3 points out what I have just explained:

LAERTES: For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,  
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,  
A violet in the youth of primy nature,  
Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting,  
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,  
No more (1,3, 5-10).

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<sup>134</sup> Draper, p. 42.

<sup>135</sup> Gibson, p. 72.

<sup>136</sup> Liston, William, “Laertes’ Advice to Ophelia in *Hamlet*”, *College Literature*, 12 (1985), p. 188.

According to Laertes, Ophelia should “fear his greatness weighed” (1,3, 16) since if he became King his interests and desires might become completely different from what they are now. His choices would depend on “the sanity and health of the whole state” (1,3, 21). According to Coronato, the Elizabethan audience could read in Laertes’ words a reference to contemporary events related to the Queen and her succession. Elizabeth did not have any direct heirs and she did not even name one. For this reason, people were afraid of what could have happened to the crown and there were tensions everywhere in the country.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, in his speech Laertes even talks about the importance of chastity – symbolised by the moon – for virtuous girls. He also thinks that people’s opinion on a woman is difficult to change if she loses her virginity. In fact, as I have explained in the second chapter, Laertes is obsessed with fashion and appearance and, probably for this reason, he is so interested in his family’s temperament. As Draper pointed out, “He had been afraid that Ophelia’s imprudent passion might stain the family honor or cause its political downfall”.<sup>138</sup> The following passage is taken from the brother-sister dialogue in Act 1, Scene 3 and highlights the importance of virtue in young women:

LAERTES: The chariest maid is prodigal enough  
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.  
Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes.  
The canker galls the infants of the spring  
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,  
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth  
Contagious blastments are more imminent (1,3, 36-42).

Ophelia seems to completely trust and believe the authorities upon her, which is why she can be considered a typical Elizabethan woman. Her behaviour can be the consequence of her youth and dependence on male figures;<sup>139</sup> in fact, when her father dies,

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<sup>137</sup> Coronato, p. 20.

<sup>138</sup> Draper, p. 50.

<sup>139</sup> Draper, p. 45.

she turns mad. Her madness may be also caused by the fact that Hamlet is forced by the King to go to England and Laertes is abroad. Regardless of the reason for her madness, it is interesting to note that Ophelia's mood always depends on men – the only people who seem to care for her but leave her completely alone at Elsinore. Moreover, her behaviour may depend on the environment of the court since the tragedy is overwhelmed by emotional repressions owing to the social status and role of each character.<sup>140</sup> Draper writes:

Ophelia is primarily a young girl, like other girls of her age; and Polonius is above all a minister of State; and Laertes is a youthful would-be courtier, not yet skilled in the technique of his courtly diplomacy.<sup>141</sup>

It is not by chance that male figures in *Hamlet* try to control female's sexuality, here represented by Ophelia, since all the play reflects the patriarchal world in which men have the complete power over women:

Shakespeare's works reflect and voice a masculine anxiety about the uses of patriarchal power over women, specifically about men's control over women's sexuality, which arises from the disparity between men's social dominance and their peculiar emotional vulnerability to women.<sup>142</sup>

Even if Ophelia's relations may seem excessive to contemporary readers, during the Elizabethan time women were expected to obey male figures and for this reason her relation with Polonius did not appear strange or wrong: "Ophelia dutifully retells to her father all that has passed between herself and Laertes";<sup>143</sup> moreover, "She permits herself to be used by her father without the slightest sense that anything is wrong".<sup>144</sup> As Coronato pointed out, what Polonius says both to Ophelia and to Laertes was perceived

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<sup>140</sup> Draper, p. 52.

<sup>141</sup> Draper, p. 52.

<sup>142</sup> Jardine, Lisa, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983, p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> Taylor, p. 277.

<sup>144</sup> Taylor, p. 281.

as wise advice that a father accustomed to the court would impart to his children,<sup>145</sup> the reason why Ophelia dutifully respects Polonius without any objection.

I have analysed the relationship between Ophelia and her male counterparts, and she may appear weak in the way she behaves towards them. However, I do not consider Ophelia as a weak woman since she tries to propose her point of view even if it might not be completely explicit. First of all, I perceive a slight rebellion in Ophelia's words towards Laertes after he has given her his advice not to trust Hamlet. In fact, she first calls her brother "watchman to my heart" (1,3, 46), but then she says that he does not have to show her the path to Heaven "as some ungracious pastors do" (1,3, 47). She seems to criticise the lack of coherence in some people, as spiritual guides or pastors, who preach something but behave differently. I think Ophelia is saying to Laertes not to teach her how to live a virtuous life if he himself does not follow the same moral principles. Another rebellion may be identified in the fact that Ophelia has probably lost her virginity with Hamlet, something which could have taken away her honour in Elizabethan society. During her madness, she sings popular songs and in "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day" (4,5, 47) she says "before you tumbled me" (4,5, 61) – this expression means that he has taken away her virginity,<sup>146</sup> probably before Laertes and Polonius' discovery of this relation. In this way, Ophelia "sings her father's and brother's fears"<sup>147</sup> since they try to protect her throughout the play. However, this song may be considered just an expression of her sexual desires which cannot be fulfilled since her sexuality is controlled and manipulated by men:

The song can also function as a fantasy of a road not taken, an expression of Ophelia's renounced erotic desires, the sexual consummation that cannot be wished devoutly but must nonetheless be wished.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Coronato, p. 27.

<sup>146</sup> Shakespeare, p. 300.

<sup>147</sup> Marino, J. James, "Ophelia's Desire", *ELH*, 84 (2017), p. 833.

<sup>148</sup> Marino, p. 833.

Regardless of the interpretation of this song, I believe that Ophelia's intention is to reveal her true desires through her madness – a way to challenge both Laertes and Polonius but also the masculine ideas of the time.

### 3.2. Can the complex of Oedipus be applied to Laertes?

According to Ernest Jones, Hamlet suffers from the Oedipus Complex. Taking into consideration the fact that Laertes is Hamlet's double, I would like to analyse the brother-sister relation and understand if the Oedipus Complex can be applied to Laertes. In order to do so, it is necessary to take for granted the existence of the complex in Hamlet, even if I criticised and refuted it in the first chapter.

First of all, the brother-sister complex is symbolised by the myth of Antigone: “the Oedipus myth is to the Oedipus complex as the myth of Antigone is to metaphoric father-daughter (brother-sister) incest and the victimization of women”.<sup>149</sup> In *Hamlet* there are different examples of brother-sister relationships: in the saga written by Saxo Grammaticus and used by Shakespeare as a source, Ophelia was considered Amleth's foster-sister; in addition, from a religious perspective, Claudius and Gertrude are seen as brother and sister, the reason why their relationship is described as incestuous.<sup>150</sup>

Laertes and Ophelia have lost their mother before the beginning of the play. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the mother is generally seen as the object of men's sexual desires – especially for the son. For this reason, her absence could be replaced by the sister – Ophelia – towards whom Laertes can drive his passions: “The sister is usually the first replacement of the mother as an erotic object; through her the boy

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<sup>149</sup> Willner, p. 62.

<sup>150</sup> Jones, p. 140.

learns to find his way to other women”.<sup>151</sup> Jones also states that a brother generally plays the role of the father<sup>152</sup> in relation to his sister and, as I have previously said, I think that Laertes is imitating Polonius in the way he behaves towards Ophelia. Moreover, in the tragedy Polonius dies and this could be an opportunity for Laertes to completely substitute his father. In this way, Ophelia could be so attached first to Polonius since she has lost her mother, and then to Laertes because she has lost her father. According to Willner, this strict bond with male figures could affect the woman’s private life and sexuality:

A girl deprived of the love of mother can become bound to father (and brother) and remain unmarried and childless. Such metaphoric father-daughter incest victimizes a woman by appropriating and dedicating to the father (brother) the life space that otherwise would be available for marriage and child.<sup>153</sup>

From my point of view, the fact that Ophelia is extremely controlled by her family may have consequences on her sexuality, since she cannot experience it. A negative effect may be even caused by Hamlet who considers her a prostitute while saying “get thee to a nunnery” (3,1, 122) during the dialogue in which they are spied on by Polonius and Claudius. It seems to be suggested that going to a nunnery is the only way that Ophelia has not to be “a breeder of sinners” (3,1, 122-123), which means a sinful woman. According to some critics, such as Dover Wilson, Hamlet’s action can be justified by the fact that Ophelia has refused him, as she says to Polonius: “I did repel his letters, and denied his access to me” (2,1, 110-111). Obviously, behind this refusal there is the Counsellor who wants to protect Ophelia. Hamlet may think that Ophelia has rejected him very much as Gertrude had previously done, and this may increase his suffering towards the female counterparts. Probably he is comparing Ophelia’s behaviour to Gertrude’s one. On this point, Bradley notes:

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<sup>151</sup> Jones, p. 138.

<sup>152</sup> Jones, p. 138.

<sup>153</sup> Willner, p. 69.

Signs that Hamlet was haunted by the horrible idea that he had been deceived in Ophelia as he had been in his mother; that she was shallow and artificial, and even that what had seemed simple and affectionate love might really have been something different.<sup>154</sup>

Given all these details, I would like to express my point of view regarding the Oedipus Complex. Ernest Jones proposes an analysis of the brother-sister complex as a derivation of the fundamental Oedipus Complex, but I think that he does not compare Hamlet and Laertes carefully and sufficiently. He recognises that “the attitude of Laertes towards his sister Ophelia is quite indistinguishable from that of their father Polonius”;<sup>155</sup> however, he simply states that Laertes suffers from this complex because he is Hamlet’s double and because of similar references in the Hamlet legend of Saxo Grammaticus – for instance the incestuous relationship between the King and the Queen and the fact that Ophelia is Hamlet’s foster-sister. I think that these elements just show some brother-sister relationships that can be identified in the tragedy, but they are not sufficient to state that the brother-sister complex really exists. I do not believe that Laertes suffers from it because, as I have previously explained, he is simply trying to control Ophelia as Polonius has done throughout his life: “both men give orders to Ophelia and seek to control her emotions, thoughts and actions”.<sup>156</sup> Polonius seems to be driven by precepts and not emotions, the same that happens with Laertes. Moreover, Laertes behaves in this way in order to maintain the family honour as the typical Elizabethan man would have done, as Draper notes in this passage:

If *Hamlet* be a tale of dynastic policy and court intrigue, Ophelia and Laertes are the innocent spectators who, hardly understanding the on-rush of events, are caught in the very vortex, and, trying to act as society had taught them to think right, are whirled, like figures in the storms of Dante’s hell, with all the rest down to irremediable ruin.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Bradley, quoted in Wilson, D., p. 109.

<sup>155</sup> Jones, pp. 138-39.

<sup>156</sup> Gibson, p. 12.

<sup>157</sup> Draper, p. 53.



Furthermore, the Oedipus Complex in Hamlet is symbolised by the presence of an enclosed space – the chamber in which Gertrude and her son speak while being spied on by Polonius. While Laertes speaks with Ophelia, there is no reference to a closet or another enclosed and private place. Probably the conversation happens inside the castle while they are alone, but it is not well specified as in the case of Hamlet and Gertrude. Moreover, the Oedipus Complex is considered the cause of Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius. According to Jones, Claudius has done what Hamlet would like to do – kill his father and marry his mother – the reason why he cannot kill his uncle without killing a part of himself.<sup>158</sup> These actions stimulate the long-repressed desire to reappear in Hamlet’s mind: he is clearly jealous of his mother and he would like to take Claudius’ place. I cannot propose a similar comparison in Laertes’ relation to Ophelia. He is able to avenge Polonius as soon as he has the opportunity. He does not want to substitute Polonius – he simply mirrors his father’s behaviour towards Ophelia. Moreover, Laertes does not see anyone taking his place in Ophelia’s life. Her only lover – Hamlet – is rejected by her as soon as Polonius and Laertes tell her to do so. Another interesting aspect which could prove my viewpoint regards Gertrude’s sexuality. It is greatly underlined in the play and it may provoke Hamlet’s desire. On the other hand, Ophelia seems to be more innocent and purer, above all for her age – this may demonstrate that she is not perceived as an erotic object by Laertes who seems not to show signs of jealousy towards her.

The idea that Ophelia is forbidden to Laertes’ eyes, such as Gertrude is forbidden to Hamlet, may create the idea of the Oedipus Complex, while it is simply the typical behaviour and temperament of the Elizabethan. To this regard, Gibson proposes a

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<sup>158</sup> Jones, p. 88.

critique highlighting a feminist perspective on *Hamlet*. The concept of women as sexual objects is one of the stereotypes advanced by the male criticism, which seems to adopt Hamlet's misogynistic point of view:

Male criticism often neglects, represses or misrepresents female experience, and stereotypes or distorts the woman's point of view. Both Gertrude and Ophelia suffer not only at the hands of the men in the play, but also in the writings of male critics who too often adopt Hamlet's own misogynistic (women-hating) viewpoint.<sup>159</sup>

This may explain the reason why critics continue to talk about erotic objects referring to Ophelia and Gertrude and why they are connected with the Oedipus Complex respectively seen in Laertes and Hamlet. Furthermore, even the idea that Ophelia is weak may be one of the consequences of a masculine perspective of the tragedy. She is one of the most represented of all Shakespeare's heroines in literature, painting and popular culture, but critics always underline her weakness and madness.<sup>160</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to point out that Jones' ideas are extremely interesting, but they are simply the fruit of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A contemporary reader who perceives Laertes as Hamlet's double and who believes in the Oedipus Complex may compare them. However, I think it is just a personal interpretation of the text I do not agree with since it does not take into consideration *Hamlet's* theological and political aspects. As Gibson pointed out, this psychoanalytical interpretation is weak and it cannot be proved, however it is an interesting viewpoint since it is based on anxiety and trauma – something which seems to live in Hamlet:

The Oedipus Complex, like all psychoanalytic theories, has obvious weakness. It cannot be proved or disproved, and it neglects historical and social factors. When applied to drama, psychoanalytic approaches often impose meaning from theory rather than from the text. Nonetheless, because psychoanalysis is concerned with personal trauma or anxiety and with dysfunctional family relationships, it has obvious appeal in discussions of *Hamlet*.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Gibson, p. 97.

<sup>160</sup> Gibson, p. 98.

<sup>161</sup> Gibson, p. 104.

## Riassunto

La mia tesi ruota attorno a un quesito: Laerte soffre del complesso di Edipo? Per rispondere a questa domanda, sono partita dall'analisi del complesso stesso, identificato dallo psicoanalista Sigmund Freud nel 1899 in relazione al personaggio di Amleto. Secondo Freud, durante l'infanzia, il bambino tende ad essere attratto sessualmente dalla madre, con il possibile odio nei confronti del padre. Si tratta di un processo che tende a risolversi negli anni, ma, se ciò non accade, potrebbero sorgere delle problematiche di tipo relazionale durante l'età adulta, come nel caso degli psiconeurotici. All'interno dell'opera *L'Interpretazione dei Sogni*, Freud sostiene che il complesso di Edipo possa essere applicato ad Amleto, personaggio della tragedia shakespeariana. Amleto, infatti, ha il compito di uccidere lo zio Claudio per vendicare la morte del proprio padre, ma riesce a portare a termine il suo dovere solamente dopo cinque atti. Molti critici si sono interrogati sul motivo di questa attesa e su ciò che spinge il principe all'inazione. Secondo il punto di vista psicoanalitico, Amleto è geloso della madre Gertrude e dunque non è capace di uccidere Claudio, il quale rappresenta ciò il principe stesso vorrebbe essere.

Ernest Jones è uno tra i critici ad aver avanzato un'interpretazione di carattere psicoanalitico dell'*Amleto*. Nato a Glamorgan nel 1879, entrò presto in contatto con Freud, di cui divenne un importante associato e seguace. Prendendo spunto dalle opinioni freudiane, nel 1949 scrisse *Hamlet and Oedipus* in cui analizzò nel dettaglio il complesso di Edipo individuato in Amleto. Inoltre, fu Jones a trattare per la prima volta il complesso in relazione alla figura di Laerte – tema da me trattato nel terzo capitolo. Secondo il critico, la repressione degli istinti di Amleto e la loro conseguente riapparizione potrebbe essere anche il motivo alla base della misoginia di Amleto, che può esse-

re identificata soprattutto nel modo in cui tratta l'amata Ofelia. Tuttavia, bisogna tenere in considerazione che il rapporto uomo-donna dell'epoca elisabettiana era completamente diverso da quello attuale. Le donne erano sottomesse alle figure maschili ed erano costrette ad obbedire, motivo per cui il comportamento di Amleto non era considerato sbagliato o esagerato all'epoca. Inoltre, il complesso di Edipo può essere simboleggiato dalla camera di Gertrude: in *Amleto* è spesso sottolineata la sessualità della donna e il dialogo tra la madre e il figlio all'interno di uno spazio privato esalta ancora di più l'allusione edipica. Personalmente, però, non concordo con le idee di Ernest Jones e non credo nel complesso di Edipo. Ritengo infatti che egli non abbia preso in considerazione tutti gli aspetti teologici e politici della tragedia, fondamentali per il contesto storico in cui è stata scritta. Nonostante ciò, la sua proposta è particolarmente affascinante e interessante per il XX secolo, soprattutto nell'ambito delle riproduzioni cinematografiche.

A questo proposito, ho deciso di analizzare il film *Amleto* di Laurence Olivier prodotto tra il 1947 e il 1948. Fin dall'infanzia Olivier apprezzò il teatro e il cinema, spesso interpretando personaggi shakespeariani. Dopo aver incontrato Ernest Jones ed essere rimasto affascinato dalle sue idee, decise di produrre il film in cui mostra il conflitto inconscio all'interno della mente di Amleto. Il castello in cui è ambientata la vicenda viene rappresentato come una prigione della mente e, data la quasi completa assenza di altri luoghi, esso simboleggia anche la paralisi e l'incapacità del protagonista di vendicare il padre. Nel film, la sessualità di Gertrude è fortemente sottolineata. Il fatto che l'attrice sia molto più giovane dell'interprete di Amleto crea un paradosso: il figlio è più vecchio della madre. Questo è il motivo per cui, quando i due attori si baciano, il pubblico non rimane scioccato dato che Gertrude e Amleto sembrano rappresentare una normale coppia di innamorati. Inoltre, viene spesso mostrato il grande letto matrimonia-

le della regina, che ha la forma di una vagina – secondo i critici questi elementi sono tutte allusioni edipiche.

Il secondo capitolo del mio elaborato si concentra attorno all'analisi del rapporto tra Amleto e Laerte, che mette in luce il tema del doppio, molto diffuso all'interno della tragedia. Sia Amleto sia Laerte devono vendicare il proprio padre, ma reagiscono in maniera completamente diversa: il primo continua a posticipare il suo dovere, mentre il secondo è pronto ad uccidere il principe in qualsiasi situazione. Una possibile spiegazione riguarda la natura della morte del defunto re e del consigliere Polonio: la causa della morte del sovrano era sconosciuta e dunque Amleto avrebbe dovuto giustificare la sua vendetta al popolo; invece la ragione della morte di Polonio era conosciuta ad Elsinore e di conseguenza una giustificazione non era necessaria. Inoltre, Laerte non è consapevole dell'omicidio di Claudio ed è per questo motivo che si affida ciecamente a lui: il giovane diventa uno strumento nelle mani del nuovo re, con cui organizza un piano infallibile per uccidere Amleto. Essendo abituato a rispettare gli ordini altrui, soprattutto del padre, Laerte esegue i comandi del re senza porsi domande. La presenza di un figlio devoto in grado di vendicare il padre mostra come Amleto si dovrebbe comportare, motivo per cui Laerte è probabilmente introdotto nella tragedia. Egli, infatti, non appare nelle opere di Saxo Grammaticus e di Belleforest utilizzate da Shakespeare come fonti. Il rapporto tra Laerte e Amleto è spesso caratterizzato dal conflitto e dallo scontro; nonostante ciò, si deduce che i due in passato erano in buoni rapporti. Per questo motivo poco prima di morire, Laerte chiede perdono al principe: spera di rappresentare una generazione migliore rispetto a quella dei genitori e di riconciliarsi con il suo amico.

Il terzo capitolo rappresenta il nodo centrale della mia tesi, in quanto risponde al quesito posto all'inizio del riassunto. Il complesso di Edipo individuato in Laerte è col-

legato alla figura della sorella, per cui è necessaria un'analisi della stessa. Ofelia è la tipica donna elisabettiana, rispettosa e obbediente ai doveri imposti dalle figure maschili – in questo caso il padre Polonio e il fratello Laerte. Spesso, infatti, lei viene considerata debole, ma la sua debolezza non è altro che la conseguenza del modo in cui le donne erano trattate all'epoca. Ofelia racconta tutto ciò che le capita al padre, il quale, non appena scopre della relazione della figlia con Amleto, le consiglia di rifiutarlo e di stare attenta. Parallelamente, Laerte le consiglia di non fidarsi delle parole del principe, che, se diventasse re, avrebbe come unico obiettivo il benessere dello Stato e i suoi interessi e desideri potrebbero cambiare rispetto a quelli attuali. Ritengo che il comportamento di Laerte sia semplicemente un'imitazione di quello del padre, motivo per cui non credo nell'esistenza del complesso di Edipo. Riprendendo la tesi di Ernest Jones, Laerte potrebbe soffrire di questo complesso; tendenzialmente, infatti, dopo la morte della madre, il figlio dirige i propri desideri sessuali nei confronti della sorella. A differenza di Amleto, però, Laerte non sembra essere geloso di Ofelia, ma cerca solo di controllarla come ogni tipico uomo elisabettiano farebbe. Jones intravede come principale conseguenza del complesso di Edipo la paralisi di Amleto, ossia la sua riluttanza nel vendicare il padre. La situazione di Laerte, invece, è completamente diversa in quanto è subito pronto a uccidere il principe. Inoltre, di Gertrude viene esplicitamente sottolineata la sessualità, ragione per cui Amleto potrebbe dirigere i propri istinti nei confronti della madre, mentre di Ofelia è sottolineata la purezza e l'innocenza. Oltretutto, il complesso di Edipo in Amleto è simboleggiato dalla presenza di una stanza privata in cui egli dialoga con la madre; mentre per quanto riguarda Laerte e Ofelia, non vi sono simboli che possano sottintendere l'esistenza del complesso.

Il concetto della donna come oggetto erotico, spesso proposto dalle interpretazioni psicoanalitiche, è uno degli stereotipi avanzati dalla critica maschile che sembra adottare il punto di vista misogino di *Amleto*. Questo potrebbe spiegare il motivo per cui Ernest Jones applica il complesso di Edipo sia nel caso di Laerte e Ofelia sia nel caso di Amleto e Gertrude, tralasciando invece gli aspetti politici e teologici della tragedia. Un lettore che percepisce Laerte come doppio di Amleto potrebbe comparare i due personaggi anche per quanto riguarda l'aspetto edipico; tuttavia si tratta di un'interpretazione contemporanea che non tiene conto del significato primario di *Amleto*.





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### ***Filmography***

*Hamlet* (1948), directed by Laurence Olivier, with Laurence Olivier, Eileen Herlie, Basil Sydney, Felix Aylmer, Jean Simmons, Terence Morgan, music by William Walton, photography by Desmond Dickinson.