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Love, Revenge, Jealousy and Legacy: The Psychology of Shakespeare

December 16, 2015 by Daniel Edward Rosler — Leave a Comment

Daniel Rosler

9 December 2015

Love, Revenge, Jealousy and Legacy: The Psychology of Shakespeare

William Shakespeare's use of language still moves audiences today, 400 years later. Four centuries of world-history, overflowing with life, love, tragedy, and loss, have passed since time placed the final punctuation mark on Shakespeare's work. Scholars have studied his legacy, seeking an understanding of "why we still care", and, how it's possible that "the plays have been performed in almost every language." Aside from his obvious talent with prose, what is it about Shakespeare's work that keeps him relevant in classrooms, on stages, in films, in hearts, in minds—and, "even in prisons, [where] teachers find […] Shakespeare offers contemporary connections that open pathways to learning for some of societies most marginalized" (Cindy Tumiel)?

A fair assessment of this legacy is that Shakespeare's characters, unique enough to remember, yet human enough to, not only appear believable, but relatable as well, render him timeless. However, this can be reduced to simpler terms: The psychology of Shakespeare's plays, both in character and story, keep him relevant. In my recent studies of Shakespeare and his mastery of the mind and, hence, the heart, I have felt particularly moved by, and subsequently compelled to learn more about, Shakespeare's themes of love, jealousy and justice.

Though psychoanalysis didn't fully materialize until the turn of the twentieth century, developed most famously by Sigmund Freud and his student Carl Jung, it certainly existed before the science came to be, preceding its scientific origins by many minds in literature and philosophy. William Shakespeare, in particular, wrote a plethora of memorable plays and casts of tragic heroes, arguably, because he understood so well the human *mind*; he knew ways in which to manipulate the voyeurs to his world, capturing them in worlds of story overflowing with emotion. The reader is practically commissioned by Shakespeare to psychoanalyze the characters, their motives, their actions and reactions. All we have are the characters' actions and their words. Even if, by soliloquy or means of less-direct explanation, when a character within the play suggests any type of motive toward the audience, they are still *people*, insofar as their capacity to lie, distort, forget, wrongly-remember, love, fear, and hate, in relation to the context of their respective literary world.

These characters have an unconscious mind and, thus, are as susceptible to the same moral discrepancies as any human being, complex in their feelings if not their wit. Moreover, even if one argues these characters are merely projections of Shakespeare's creativity, there is, as words leak from the mind *before* they drip from the pen, still room to analyze these characters and plots through the lens of psychoanalysis, for they are projections of Shakespeare, yes, but he too has an unconscious mind, full of motives hidden even from himself.

In his introduction to Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny*, Hugh Haughton quotes the psychoanalyst who, despite suggesting in the beginning of the text that most psychoanalysts have a lack of ambition in "aesthetic investigations," subsequently and, curiously, had this to say: "Creative writers […] are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream" (viii). This statement, a word-play on a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy,") does more than exhibit a seemingly contradictory appraisal of art and the "aesthetic." What Freud proposes is true; creative writers are valuable. Society can *learn* from literature as much as it can from history, and often more perceptively, as art is a more intimate exhibition than most passages of lifeless, historical rhetoric.

Director John Madden's film, *Shakespeare in Love*, written by Marc Norman, winner of seven Oscars, including best picture, though lenient in its historical factualness, portrays a young "Will" Shakespeare who finds the inspiration and drive for penning *Romeo & Juliet* by his fictional love interest, Viola. Their love affair also ends in their separation—though, less tragically as it is one of distance and not suicide. In its comedic interpretation of the years in which we know little of Shakespeare, the film takes a stab at explaining the obvious rationale: How could someone write so well and so intensely about such a difficultly definable concept like love, if they had not experienced such amorousness themselves?

However, whether or not Shakespeare ever felt the intense love he so often wrote about, does not change his ability to write passionate and beautifully articulated verses on the subject matter. The aforementioned *Romeo & Juliet*, one of the many famous Shakespeare plays, a tragedy about a love between two people so strong that it leads to their death, suggests that love, when felt as purely and whole-heartedly as Rome and Juliet, is more important than life. However, the play's *real* impact, is the implicit suggestion that love has no afterlife: "Shakespeare removed any such transcendent vision of posthumous love from his play. In doing so, he created his most potent expression of what it meant for love to be mortal" (Ramie Targoff 17). Thus, the notion that Romeo and Juliet died for the sake of their love, is an even more impactful one; they've left the only life they knew existed because it would be absent of the other; or, as Targoff argues: "*Romeo and Juliet* [is] a play that at once registers the enormously high cost of denying posthumous love and derives its emotional and aesthetic power from this very denial" (18).

Arguably born as an inevitable counter-part to love, jealousy, like its large-hearted predecessor, when taken to an extreme, can conquer the mind like an emotional cancer. "Seventeenth-century writers were fascinated by the emotional turmoil that jealousy provoked, and their jealous characters feel darker and more psychologically realistic than earlier representations" (Rebecca Olson 3). In regards to Shakespeare's work, *Othello* is a story about people destroyed by their extreme jealousy; it affects and warps all the characters that go near it and stay too long—like a night-time-promenade through groves of poison ivy. Jealousy, when given enough strength, can overpower the strongest of love, the toughest bonds of trust, and, as suggested in *Othello*, can destroy the mightiest of warriors.

Othello's theme, its central concern, revolves around the effects that jealousy has on relationships, and it wastes no time showing up; it appears in the very first scene, displayed in an interaction between Iago and Roderigo: Iago, disquieted by Michael Cassio being made officer before him, spits bitter stained verses into the air: "Forsooth, a great arithmetician,/One Michael Cassio, a Florentine […] That never set a squadron in the field,/ Nor the division of a battle knows,/ More than a spinster" (Shakespeare 320).

As Olson writes, "Jealousy was the fear of losing possession, either of household property or people" (3-4). Shortly after Iago and Roderigo's conversation, they disturb Brabantio, telling him he's been "robbed," and when asked what of, they respond that his *daughter*, Desdemona, as though she were but a glamorous antique, has been stolen from him, taken to "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (Shakespeare 325). Brabantio, in an anxious response, exposes his own jealousy—subtly at first: "Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds,/ By what you see them act"; then he desperately grasps for any information regarding the location of his daughter and the "Moor"; finally, shortly after, in conversation with the Duke, he once again speaks of Desdemona as though she's his property: "She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted" (Shakespeare 327, 336). This is perhaps most condescending in its implication that Brabantio is unwilling to believe his daughter had made a choice of her own—on her own, without voodoo, under the influence of a spell or some other form of mystical-entrapment. Perhaps the most culpable in their negative influence on the plot, Brabantio, before leaving, tells Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee"; and, as a result, he plants the first seedling of doubt into the mind of Othello, who, foreshadowing his own demise, responds: "My life upon her faith!" (Shakespeare 346-347).

Othello eventually falls victim to one of Iago's elaborate plots—driven, unsurprisingly, by jealousy—to ruin the lives of others. He never explains his motives: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word" (Shakespeare 470). Iago's suggestions that Desdemona has been unfaithful to Othello, having relations with Cassio, seems all the more believable considering the psychological manipulation of Brabantio, planting the possibility that, since Desdemona was not truthful to him, she, too, may not be with Othello. What Othello once thought impossible, that Desdemona would never be unfaithful, he now sees as, not only possible, but, given the planted evidence, very likely. This slowly tears away at him, beginning most painfully, as expressed in the following stanzas:

I had been happy if the general camp,

Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,

So I had nothing known. Oh, now, forever

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!

Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars

That makes ambition virtue! Oh, farewell! (Shakespeare 401)

Though love and jealousy are successful in their pervasiveness, so too is the need for justice, vengeance—and, particularly: revenge. Some critics have taken to reading Hamlet as an interesting example of the Oedipus *complex*, suggesting that he never grew out of the Freudian phase, in which, it is implied that a male son will love our mothers and, thus, want to compete with our fathers for their affection. Proper development, according to Freud, occurs when the son recognizes the absurdity of this situation and, subsequently, no longer sees the father as a threat. Part of what drives Hamlet to such outrage is, as theorized by aforementioned critics, that a *new* father came in quickly before he had a chance to win his mother's love.

Though interesting, I think it is a more accurate suggestion that Hamlet's rage results less because of his psychological development, and more from his innocence—some would call it "naivety," but I find that too cynical. Hamlet, in unadulterated interest in helping his father, is sincerely upset by what everyone else seems to already know, understand and easily accept: that the world isn't fair. I think that his exposure to the corruption of those in power shakes him to the core. Have we not all felt such a crushing disappointment? He is enraged by the lack of interest in pursuing his father's death. He finds the times spent mourning ended too quickly; he is, without knowing any specifics of foul-play, disturbed by the situation.

Hamlet, a young and passionate man, is a study into the mind; for, this play is literary commentary on the *fragility* of the mind; let's consider Hamlet's source in learning of his uncle's betrayal: the ghost of his father. He does not have a living witness to the crime. Secondly, as his quest for justice—an emotional sense of righteousness resulting from a psychological obsession of vengeance—progresses, he himself appears crazy with each new scene. It has always been a risk pursuing justice—of searching for truth as it stumbles, lost in a dark forest of elaborate lies. "Delay, and the pretence of madness that almost always goes with it, are such prominent figures of revenge tragedy that it seems likely that they are crucial to its structure of meaning" (Peter Mercer 2).

The multi-dimensional, complex characters that inhabit the worlds shaped by creative writers are what give "life" to differing works of prose and poetry; more so than the context of their world, though that too has its own psychological implications, the characters walk off the page and into the mind, leaving a lasting impression—fossils preserved for millions of years as opposed to a footprint in the mud, washed away and destroyed by sunshine. William Shakespeare is the *epitome* of a creative writer, and an inspiring example of the possible resulting legacy a writer can have on the world: four centuries of emotional and psychological impact. Despite such a towering reputation, William Shakespeare is, at least in his literature, a very honest, sensitive and humble story-teller—a human being more whose greatest talent was his feeling like a human and knowing ways in which to express that. I have chosen three dominant themes within his plays and characters that I find particularly impactful, as well as reflective of Shakespeare's genius—his knowledge and understanding of the mind, thus the "heart." Love, jealousy and a pursuit of justice litter the plots of some of Shakespeare's most renowned plays, sometimes the central theme, other times reflected briefly in a character. "I would suggest that […] Shakespeare's extraordinary powers of observation and penetration granted him a degree of insight that it has taken the word three subsequent centuries to reach" (Jones 139). Indeed, Freud and other psychologists must tip their hats to Shakespeare, a man who preceded them, belonging to the original class of psychoanalysts: *poets*.

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