

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX IN CORIOLANUS

English scholarship, which is only beginning to accept the method of interpreting certain plays and poems as historical allegory, has displayed an even greater reluctance to apply the methods of psycho-analysis to literature. This reluctance appears to be based on the timorous view that something which is essential to literature may in this way be lost, be explained away; that, by too complete a mechanistic representation of the processes of artistic creation, the magic of the achievement may be analysed away.

This is a very narrow, bleak view to take of the endless variety of life, for it does not seem to me that the miracle of a flower's growth is in any way diminished by a knowledge of the behaviour of chromosomes, or that the marvel of a dog's intelligence is lessened by the discovery of the conditioned reflex. Science is still very far from being able to explain everything and psycho-analysis is beginning to adumbrate an unexplainable core to the strange world which is the human being, a core so far immeasurably deeper than the mere workings of the mind which, even in its unconscious functioning, no longer appears to be the final controlling force in our being. * Psycho-analysis does, however, help us to understand the significance to the human mind of certain myths and story patterns at different levels of consciousness and therefore enables us to understand why these myths persist and are popular.

Psycho-analysis helps us to understand why certain plays continue to be stage successes when the critics have condemned them as dramatic failures. We have all had the experience of feeling that a play is great without being able to find logical reasons for our feeling, and in this case our failure is not always due to our being without the necessary critical equipment, since the greatest and most practised critics have been as baffled as the ordinary play-goer. The most outstanding case of this, of course, is *Ham-*

(1) Georg Groddeck. *The Book of the It.*

let, and Dr. Ernest Jones * 1) has shown how the critics have consistently failed to evolve any satisfactory explanation of Hamlet's behaviour, or to get much beyond the judgement that the tragedy somehow fails in plot and in characterisation. And yet this play, in which Shakespeare is said to have failed to dramatise his material, has, even when translated into languages remote from English, a strange and powerful appeal to the imagination.

Dr. Ernest Jones who, with Otto Rank, is one of the few who combine mastery of psycho-analytical technique with a wide knowledge of art and literature, has worked out a convincing interpretation of the *Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* as a variation on the Oedipus theme. Freud and Rank had previously observed the Oedipus symbolism in *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*, and it is my purpose in the following notes to attempt to extend this kind of treatment to the *Tragedy of Coriolanus*.

Once more the old accusation may be held up against one that one is getting out of the play more than the dramatist ever intended to put into it, but in this case it is of necessity so. Ernest Jones has pointed out that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare was not wholly conscious of what he was about, and that the reason why Hamlet could not understand his own reluctance to kill his uncle was that Shakespeare himself was not aware of the complex in himself which was working itself out in his creative conception of this old tale. It is possible that Sophocles, with his knowledge of medicine, was more aware than any other subsequent writer who has used this theme, up to the time of the discovery of the Oedipus Complex, of the especial cathartic value of the dramatic treatment of this myth. * 2).

Let us see how the tragedy fits this terrible ancient story. Coriolanus' father is dead and he is never mentioned in the play. The father-hatred which is a part of the myth now takes the quite usual form of revolt against authority (much revolutionary activity springs from this complex) and becomes, in this case, an impulse to destroy Rome. The corresponding father-admiration, the desire for identification with the father, has attempted to express itself in Coriolanus' candidature for consulship, and is perhaps involved in his ultimate failure to destroy the city. Rome therefore, in terms of the myth, is his father against whom he rebels and his father with whom he wishes to identify himself, and whose place

(1) Ernest Jones. *Essays in Applied Psychology*.

(2) Edmund Wilson. *The Wound and the Bow*.

he wishes to take; so that at different times and to his own astonishment (O world, thy slippery turns) he finds himself wishing to govern it and determined to ruin it.

The impatience of Coriolanus with the democratic formalities of election and his refusal to follow the conventions are an extension of the child's hatred of his father's authority at home, and a sign of the irrational depths from which his impulses spring.

Coriolanus' mother lives and occupies an unusually important place in his life. His attachment to his mother is well known in Rome and during the first lines of the play we are told by the First Citizen that the heroic deeds of Coriolanus were performed not for a patriotic reason but that "he did it to please his mother and to be partly proud." This is a point which is generally missed in making of the play a tragedy of pride. Shakespeare does not waste hints of this kind in opening scenes, the pleasing of his mother comes first and is sufficiently known in Rome to be common street gossip. It is a mutual love and Volumnia gives away a part of the secret when she says to the retiring Virgilia, Coriolanus' wife, "if my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love." (I.iii. 3-6) It is his mother who rejoices in his triumphal return in Act II scene i. His wife has to be pushed rather awkwardly forward and Coriolanus shows some bitterness as he observes her unjoyful behaviour.

Would'st thou have laughed had I come coffin'd home,

That weepst to see me triumph? II. i. 175-6.

There is a clear resemblance between the position of the unfortunate Virgilia and that of the puzzled Ophelia. These two pleasant, normal young women are each neglected by men who are involved in an emotional tangle which is beyond the comprehension of plain and simple love.

It is his mother's power over him which in the end induces Coriolanus to spare Rome, though, as I have already suggested, identification with Rome as father plays some part in it too. So this conflict of mother-love and father-hatred is never resolved and he fails to achieve the double purpose of the myth, the love of the mother and the death of the father. This is his tragedy and this is why he must die.

Here, considering the two plays as patterns of the Oedipus story, is the exact reverse of the Hamlet situation. Hamlet can at any moment destroy his uncle, who, as Ernest Jones has shown,

is in part a father-substitute and therefore an object of identification, but his mother's behaviour has already tarnished the love between them. Coriolanus, on the other hand, retains his mother's love but fails to destroy his father, the state of Rome.

In *Coriolanus*, as in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows an amazing intuition in working out the supporting details to this statement of the myth. Consistent with a mother-fixation is Coriolanus' admiration for chastity and cold-bloodedness in woman. This to me is the only reason for his commendation of Valeria, for which I can see no dramatic reason.

The noble sister of Publicola,
The moon of Rome; chaste as the icicle
That's curdied by the frost from purest snow
And hangs on Dian's temple: dear Valeria. V. iii. 63-6.

His destructiveness of nature is similar to the sadistic tendency which Freud observed to be associated in Leonardo da Vinci with a mother-fixation (1). (That disease of the mind, the desire to be a dictator, carries violence and cruelty with it: The Caesars, Napoleons and Hitlers of the lunatic asylums have to be locked up because of this. Otherwise their belief would be as harmless as Mr. Shaw's idea that he is as great as Shakespeare). This violence and destructiveness is cleverly repeated in his little son who so ferociously manmucks the butterfly. The instinctive father hatred is charmingly illustrated in its inception in the behaviour of the little boy, for, when the women go out to meet Coriolanus who is advancing to destroy Rome, and there is talk of his treading on them, the boy flares up and says.

A shall not tread on me;
I'll run away till I'm bigger, but then I'll fight. V.iii. 129-130
So Shakespeare plays one of his most effective tricks with time, showing us face to face the hero as child and as grown man, the Oedipus complex in an early stage and in its terrible working out.

Thus the real tragedy of Coriolanus is not one of pride any more than that of Hamlet is one of over-meditation. The clue is given us by Shakespeare himself. He did it to please his mother.

The only justification for the applying of a psychoanalytical principle to a play, apart from providing a theory with yet another

(1) S. Freud. Leonardo da Vinci.

case-history, occurs when such application throws new light on obviously effective things in the play which cannot be adequately explained by ordinary critical methods. In the case of *Hamlet* psycho-analysis explains why a theme which appears to be unsuccessfully dramatised is capable of producing such a profound and universal effect. In the case of *Coriolanus*, although excessive and unusual pride may be the clue to much of his behaviour, it does not explain certain curious features of the play noted above, namely, Coriolanus' exaggerated and curiously timed admiration for chastity in woman, and the humble position of his wife throughout the play. The conventionally accepted pattern of the play as a conflict of pride against better impulses does not provide as rich or as poignant a view of the meeting outside Rome of the conqueror Coriolanus, the suppliant mother and the rebellious little son as emerges if the Oedipus myth pattern is applied. The situation then gains in interest and significance. The hero has half fulfilled the myth; but its fulfillment in the long run is not humanly possible. That is his tragedy and that is the inescapable fate that hangs over him.

The gods of Greek drama and the ineluctable forces they wielded have become the powers of the unconscious depths of the mind. The greatness of Shakespeare and Ibsen as modern dramatists is partly due to their intuitive realisation of this fact. a discovery subsequently elaborated and documented by Freud and others. Art once more has led and left to science the business of classification and statement in dead terms.

When a theme has previously been said to have been insufficiently or unsuccessfully dramatised, the judgement has been made in ignorance of the function of an underlying myth pattern, which may run contrapuntally to the action and of which the dramatist may be completely unconscious. But is there any reason why the dramatising of a theme should be limited to the conscious ordering by the dramatist of the material which his mind provides? That would surely be to impose too narrow and bleak a view of the creative process.

That awareness on the part of the dramatist of the function of the Oedipus complex as the mainspring of the action and his deliberate handling of it as such need not interfere with the effectiveness of a play has recently been demonstrated by Giraudoux in his *Electre*. But when a complex is raised to the conscious plane and becomes part of the logical structure of a play, then the un-

conscious counterpoint, which to a greater or lesser degree is apt to be present, may be provided by a quite different impulse from the unconscious life, an impulse of which the dramatist is therefore again unaware.

Herein lies the continuous interest of this kind of analytical procedure and its defence against the charge of destroying the wonder of a work of art.

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