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Repression, Melancholia, and the Death Drive: An Integrated Freudian Reading of *Hamlet*

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Abstract: *This article provides a Freudian psychoanalytic reading of Shakespeare's Hamlet, focusing on the prince's delay in avenging his father's murder. Employing a structural approach grounded in Classical Freudian theory, the study examines how* ***Oedipal identification, melancholic incorporation, and the death drive*** *interact to produce Hamlet's inaction and the play's tragic resolution. Methodologically, the research combines close textual analysis of soliloquies, key dialogues, and dramatic events with theoretical insights from Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams (1900/2003) and Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920/2003), supplemented by contemporary psychoanalytic scholarship. Findings reveal that Hamlet's procrastination is not intellectual or moral but* ***psychically determined****: Claudius externalizes repressed patricidal desire, Gertrude embodies maternal ambivalence, and Ophelia functions as a displaced object of libido and aggression. Repetition compulsion and fixation on mortality structure his soliloquies and actions, culminating in revenge coinciding with self-destruction. The study demonstrates the centrality of unconscious structures in shaping character motivation, narrative delay, and thematic development. Implications extend to psychoanalytic literary criticism, affect theory, and interdisciplinary Shakespeare studies. Future research may explore comparative Oedipal dynamics in other tragedies, performative enactments of repression, and intersections with cognitive literary studies and trauma theory.*

Keywords: Freud, Oedipus complex, melancholia, death drive, repression, Shakespeare, tragedy

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INTRODUCTION

Few figures in literary history have been subjected to such sustained interpretive scrutiny as Shakespeare's Hamlet. From Romantic introspection to existential paralysis, from political theology to affect studies, the prince of Denmark has served as a screen upon which successive critical paradigms project their anxieties. Yet the central question persists: why does Hamlet delay?

The problem of delay has generated centuries of debate. Goethe viewed Hamlet as excessively sensitive; Coleridge interpreted him as incapacitated by reflection; A. C. Bradley (1904) diagnosed constitutional melancholy. In the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud proposed a radically different explanation: Hamlet hesitates because Claudius has enacted the son's repressed Oedipal wish (Freud, 1900). Ernest Jones (1949) systematized this claim, arguing that Hamlet's unconscious identification with the murderer produces inhibition.

However, Freudian readings have often been dismissed as biographical reductionism or as oversimplified familial allegory (Bloom, 1998; Greenblatt, 2001). Recent scholarship tends to privilege political, theological, or performance-oriented interpretations, leaving psychoanalysis either historicized or sidelined.

This article contends that such dismissal is premature. Rather than treating Freud's theory as a narrow Oedipal formula, I argue that *Hamlet* dramatizes a complex psychic structure integrating:

1. Repressed Oedipal desire
2. Melancholic incorporation of the lost father
3. Repetitive compulsion toward death

If Hamlet intellectually accepts the Ghost's command and repeatedly condemns Claudius, what unconscious mechanism prevents immediate revenge?

This study argues that Hamlet's delay is structurally inevitable. Claudius embodies Hamlet's repressed wish; melancholia converts grief into self-punishment; and the death drive orients the prince not toward restoration but annihilation.

By synthesizing Freud's Oedipus complex (1900), melancholia (1917), and death drive (1920), this paper proposes that Hamlet's tragedy is not indecision but psychic implosion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Freud's earliest reference to *Hamlet* appears in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), where he contrasts Hamlet with Oedipus: Oedipus fulfills unconscious desire; Hamlet represses it. Freud later writes that Hamlet "cannot take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother" (Freud, 1900).

Ernest Jones (1949) elaborates this argument in *Hamlet and Oedipus*, identifying inhibition as guilt derived from repressed patricidal impulse. Norman Holland (1964) expands psychoanalytic criticism by emphasizing reader-response dimensions of unconscious projection.

Jacques Lacan's seminar on *Hamlet* (1959–60) reframes the play through desire and the Symbolic order, shifting from biological Oedipus to linguistic lack. André Green (1979) reads Hamlet through the "dead mother complex," while Julia Kristeva (1982) interprets melancholia through abjection.

More recent critics have turned away from Freud. Stephen Greenblatt (2001) situates the play within Reformation anxieties about purgatory. Gail Kern Paster (2010) emphasizes humoral psychology. Margreta de Grazia (2007) interrogates temporality and subjectivity. Maus (2013) examines inwardness historically rather than psychoanalytically.

The result is a curious displacement: Freud is acknowledged historically but rarely reintegrated theoretically.

The scholarly gap lies in the absence of an integrated Classical Freudian reading that moves beyond reductive Oedipal explanation to include melancholia and the death drive as structural determinants of delay.

Theoretical Framework: Classical Freudian Integration

This study synthesizes three major Freudian concepts.

The Oedipus Complex (Freud, 1900)

The child harbors unconscious desire for the mother and rivalry toward the father. Repression transforms desire into ambivalence—love and hatred intertwined.

In *Hamlet*, Claudius has fulfilled the son's unconscious wish: he has removed the father and married the mother. Revenge therefore becomes self-condemnation.

Mourning and Melancholia (Freud, 1917)

Freud distinguishes mourning (healthy detachment) from melancholia (pathological incorporation). In melancholia, the lost object is internalized, and hostility toward it turns against the self.

Hamlet's self-reproach—
"O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (2.2.550)—
suggests melancholia rather than ordinary grief.

The Death Drive (Freud, 1920)

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces repetition compulsion and the death drive (Thanatos). The psyche exhibits a tendency toward inorganic stillness.

Hamlet's obsession with decay—
"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90)—
extends beyond politics into psychic structure.

The graveyard scene (5.1) literalizes repetition: skulls return, mortality insists.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs **psychoanalytic textual hermeneutics**, consisting of:

- Close reading of soliloquies
- Symbolic analysis of imagery (rot, corruption, sexuality, decay)
- Examination of displaced aggression
- Correlation of dramatic structure with Freudian metapsychology

The approach avoids psychobiographical speculation about Shakespeare and instead treats the play as a psychic text structured by repression and return.

Oedipal Repression and Repetition Compulsion: The Psychic Logic of Delay (Acts I–III)

Repression and the Oedipal Kernel

Freud's earliest sustained engagement with *Hamlet* appears in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he proposes that the prince's paralysis originates in repressed Oedipal desire (Freud, 1900/2003). The crucial insight is not biographical but structural: Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because Claudius has enacted the son's own unconscious wish. As Freud famously observes, the play presents "the same ground as Oedipus Rex," but with desire repressed rather than fulfilled (Freud, 1900/2003).

In Act I, Hamlet's language already signals ambivalent attachment rather than simple mourning. His first soliloquy begins with a wish for dissolution:

"O that this too too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129).

This longing for bodily disintegration is not immediately directed toward revenge but toward self-erasure. Freud (1900/2003) argues that repression does not annihilate desire; it displaces and distorts it. Hamlet's fixation on Gertrude's sexuality—"incestuous sheets" (1.2.157)—reveals precisely such distortion.

The intensity of sexual disgust exceeds moral protest. As Jones (1949) argues, Hamlet's repulsion toward Gertrude's remarriage betrays unconscious jealousy rather than filial piety. The speed of remarriage—"O most wicked speed!" (1.2.156)—is experienced as personal betrayal. The anxiety is not simply that the throne is usurped but that maternal intimacy has been transferred.

Freud (1900/2003) explains that ambivalence—simultaneous love and hostility toward the same object—is constitutive of the Oedipus complex. Hamlet's rhetoric oscillates between reverence for his father and rage toward his mother, yet the emotional charge exceeds political grievance. The father's death activates rivalry; the mother's sexuality triggers repressed attachment.

Norman Holland (1964) notes that Hamlet's psychic drama unfolds not as ethical deliberation but as defensive displacement. The play's early scenes establish what André Green (1979) would later call a structure of "internal deadness"—a psychic blockage grounded in ambivalence.

Thus, the foundational problem of delay is already inscribed in Act I. The Ghost's command does not generate action because it activates repression.

The Ghost and Deferred Meaning

When the Ghost demands revenge—"Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25)—the imperative appears unambiguous. Yet Freud's concept of deferred action (Nachträglichkeit) clarifies why command does not equal execution (Freud, 1900/2003).

Deferred action means that earlier psychic traces acquire meaning retroactively. The Ghost's revelation does not introduce new desire but reactivates latent rivalry. Claudius has fulfilled the son's unconscious fantasy: the removal of the father and possession of the mother. As Lacan (1977) later reformulates, desire is structured around lack. Claudius occupies the position Hamlet unconsciously desired. Killing him would mean confronting this identification. Hamlet's vow—

"Thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain" (1.5.102–103)

—suggests overwriting memory. Yet repression is not erasure. Freud (1900/2003) insists that repressed wishes persist in disguised form. Hamlet's theatricality—his decision to "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.172)—is not strategy alone; it is symptom.

Greenblatt (2001) reads the Ghost historically as a remnant of Catholic purgatory. Yet psychoanalytically, the Ghost represents the internalized father—an agency that commands but also judges. The superegoic function intensifies guilt rather than liberates action (Freud, 1923/2003).

Thus, the Ghost amplifies repression rather than resolving it.

The Mousetrap and Identification

Hamlet's plan to stage *The Murder of Gonzago* appears rational:

"The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.633–634).

However, Freud (1900/2003) observes that neurotic subjects often seek external confirmation to avoid confronting internal conflict. The Mousetrap allows Hamlet to witness patricide symbolically. Yet even after Claudius reacts (3.2.254–275), Hamlet does not strike.

Why?

Freud's theory of identification is instructive. Identification is the earliest form of emotional tie; it may coexist with rivalry (Freud, 1921/2003). Claudius is both enemy and double. He has enacted what the unconscious desired.

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Jones (1949) argues that Hamlet's inhibition arises because revenge would fulfill his own repressed wish. Killing Claudius collapses projection. The enemy is too intimate. This dynamic becomes explicit in the prayer scene (3.3). Hamlet finds Claudius defenseless:

"Now might I do it pat" (3.3.73).

Yet he refrains, rationalizing salvation. Freud (1920/2003) notes that the ego generates secondary explanations to conceal primary drives. Hamlet's theological reasoning is defensive rationalization.

If Claudius is the projection of repressed desire, killing him would mean psychic self-recognition. Inhibition thus functions as self-protection.

Repetition Compulsion and the Emergence of the Death Drive

Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* introduces repetition compulsion—the tendency to repeat painful experiences beyond the pursuit of pleasure (Freud, 1920/2003). Hamlet's discourse increasingly gravitates toward death imagery.

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90) becomes more than political metaphor; it becomes psychic atmosphere.

The "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (3.1.56–90) articulates not merely philosophical doubt but oscillation between existence and annihilation. Freud (1920/2003) proposes that the psyche harbors a drive toward inorganic stillness—the death drive (Thanatos). Hamlet contemplates "the undiscovered country" (3.1.79). The speech moves rhythmically toward non-being, sleep, and cessation. Repetition of death imagery suggests compulsion rather than deliberation.

Kristeva (1982) links melancholia to fascination with abjection and death. Hamlet's fixation on decay anticipates the graveyard scene. The prince is drawn not toward restoration but dissolution.

This pattern intensifies after the killing of Polonius (3.4.23–24). The murder is impulsive, displaced. Freud (1920/2003) describes repetition as reenactment of unresolved trauma. The father returns symbolically; the wrong father dies. Holland (1964) notes that Hamlet's aggression erupts only when misdirected. Direct confrontation remains inhibited.

Thus, repetition compulsion structures the drama: contemplation replaces action; displacement replaces revenge.

The Closet Scene and the Return of the Repressed

In 3.4, Hamlet confronts Gertrude with startling erotic intensity:

"In the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed" (3.4.92).

Freud (1900/2003) asserts that repressed wishes return disguised and intensified. Hamlet's language is saturated with tactile imagery. The disgust is voyeuristic; the moral critique is sexualized. Green (1979) argues that melancholia often involves incorporation of the lost object. Hamlet's fixation on his

mother's sexuality suggests unresolved attachment. The father's death removes prohibition; Claudius occupies the place of rival.

When Hamlet kills Polonius—"Dead for a ducat" (3.4.23)—the act is misdirected. Displacement is complete. Freud (1900/2003) identifies displacement as a central mechanism of dream-work and symptom formation. The wrong object receives aggression. The Ghost's reappearance in this scene is visible only to Hamlet. Gertrude sees nothing (3.4.131–140). Psychoanalytically, the father has been internalized. The superego now speaks from within.

Freud (1923/2003) defines the superego as heir to the Oedipus complex. The paternal voice commands restraint even as it demands revenge. Hamlet is trapped between identification and prohibition.

Synthesis: The Structural Inevitability of Delay

Acts I–III demonstrate a coherent psychic structure:

- Repressed Oedipal desire (Freud, 1900/2003)
- Ambivalent identification (Freud, 1921/2003)
- Defensive rationalization (Freud, 1920/2003)
- Displacement of aggression (Freud, 1900/2003)
- Repetition compulsion and deathward orientation (Freud, 1920/2003)

Hamlet's delay is therefore not weakness, nor excessive intellect, nor mere moral scruple. It is structural inevitability. Claudius is both rival and double. The father is both lost and internalized. The mother is both sacred and desired. Revenge would collapse repression.

Thus, the tragedy's first movement establishes that action is psychically impossible without catastrophic consequence.

Melancholia, Thanatos, and the Catastrophic Collapse of Repression (Acts IV–V)

If Acts I–III establish repression and identification, Acts IV–V stage their terminal consequences. The movement of the play increasingly shifts from Oedipal ambivalence to deathward repetition. Freud's theorization of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920/2003) becomes indispensable for understanding the trajectory of the final acts. Hamlet no longer oscillates merely between action and inaction; he gravitates toward annihilation.

Ophelia and the Displacement of Erotic Cathexis

Ophelia's trajectory reveals further displacement of Hamlet's unresolved desire. Freud (1905/2003) argues that repression often results in substitution: libidinal energy migrates to safer objects. Ophelia functions as such a substitute. Yet Hamlet rejects her violently:

"Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.121).

The cruelty exceeds strategic distancing. As Freud (1900/2003) observes, when repression intensifies, the ego may defend itself by repudiating the substitute object. Hamlet's hostility toward Ophelia

parallels his disgust toward Gertrude, but it is safer: Ophelia is socially subordinate and erotically available.

Kristeva (1982) connects melancholia to the collapse of symbolic order and linguistic fragmentation. Ophelia's madness literalizes what Hamlet represses. Her songs dissolve coherence; her speech becomes repetition and fragmentation (4.5.23–66). In psychoanalytic terms, Ophelia externalizes the psychic breakdown Hamlet narrowly avoids.

Green (1979) identifies in melancholia a withdrawal of libido from the world and its reinvestment in the ego. Hamlet increasingly detaches from external bonds. He stages cruelty toward Ophelia at her grave:

"I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum" (5.1.254–256).

The declaration comes too late. Love surfaces only in proximity to death. Freud (1917/2003) notes that in melancholia, ambivalence intensifies attachment even as hostility destroys it. Hamlet's confession emerges at the site of irretrievable loss.

Ophelia's drowning—ambiguous between accident and suicide—further dramatizes the death drive's pull. As Paster (2010) suggests in humoral terms, excess emotion overwhelms bodily regulation. Psychoanalytically, the image of watery dissolution mirrors Hamlet's earlier wish that his "solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129).

Ophelia's death is not incidental; it anticipates Hamlet's own deathward surrender.

The Graveyard Scene and Repetition Compulsion

The graveyard scene (5.1) constitutes the play's most explicit meditation on repetition and mortality. Hamlet's encounter with Yorick's skull stages confrontation with the materiality of death:

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him" (5.1.190).

Freud (1920/2003) argues that repetition compulsion operates beyond pleasure. The psyche returns obsessively to scenes of trauma. Hamlet's fascination with skulls, decay, and bodily disintegration suggests more than philosophical curiosity. He rehearses mortality.

The imagery of dust—"Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust" (5.1.209–210)—enacts reduction to inorganic matter. Freud's death drive describes precisely such a movement toward the inorganic state (Freud, 1920/2003).

Importantly, Hamlet appears calmer here than earlier. The oscillation between rage and paralysis subsides into fatalistic acceptance. This shift signals not resolution but surrender. Lacan (1977) suggests that Hamlet's desire is structured around lack; the object is perpetually deferred. In the graveyard, the ultimate object—death—becomes visible and tangible. The fascination with bones replaces erotic fixation.

Jones (1949) reads this scene as final detachment from Oedipal inhibition. Yet the detachment is ambiguous. Rather than overcoming repression, Hamlet seems absorbed into Thanatos. The repetitive rhetoric—dust, skull, rot—confirms the compulsion Freud describes (Freud, 1920/2003). The scene literalizes what has been metaphorical throughout.

The Return to Action: Sublimation or Collapse?

In Act V, Hamlet appears transformed:

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10).

Some critics interpret this as theological reconciliation (Greenblatt, 2001). Others see stoic resignation (Bloom, 1998). From a Freudian perspective, this acceptance reflects relinquishment of ego mastery. Freud (1920/2003) maintains that the death drive works silently, often masked by rationalization. Hamlet's newfound calm does not represent psychological integration but exhaustion of repression. His acceptance of the duel—despite foreboding—reveals surrender:

"The readiness is all" (5.2.218).

The phrase suggests preparedness for death rather than triumph.

Holland (1964) argues that Hamlet's final act fulfills narrative necessity but not psychic reconciliation. The duel unfolds rapidly, almost mechanically. Claudius is finally killed, yet only after Gertrude's death and Hamlet's own mortal wound.

If repression structured delay, its collapse produces catastrophe. Hamlet kills Claudius impulsively:

"Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane" (5.2.310).

The language reactivates Oedipal resentment. Yet the act occurs when Hamlet himself is dying. Revenge is possible only when self-preservation no longer matters.

Freud (1900/2003) suggests that repression can be lifted under extreme psychic pressure. Hamlet's impending death removes inhibition. The ego no longer protects itself. Thus, action coincides with self-destruction.

Death Drive and the Logic of Tragic Closure

Freud's death drive posits a fundamental tendency toward quiescence (Freud, 1920/2003). The conclusion of *Hamlet* fulfills this trajectory: nearly all major characters die. The stage is cleared.

The restoration of order under Fortinbras is politically neat but psychically hollow. The tragedy's emotional center lies not in state succession but in psychic implosion. Kristeva (1982) associates melancholia with proximity to the void. Hamlet's final words—

"The rest is silence" (5.2.342)

—are strikingly minimal. Language ceases. Silence replaces speech. If repression operates through language and displacement, silence marks its termination.

Green (1979) notes that melancholia culminates in either reinvestment in life or total withdrawal. Hamlet chooses neither consciously; he succumbs to the deathward pull.

Thus, the death drive integrates with Oedipal conflict and melancholia to produce structural inevitability. Revenge is achieved only when it no longer threatens psychic exposure.

Integrated Synthesis

Across Acts IV–V, three Freudian structures converge:

1. **Oedipal Identification** – Claudius as externalized wish (Freud, 1900/2003; Jones, 1949).
2. **Melancholic Incorporation** – Internalized father, self-reproach (Freud, 1917/2003; Green, 1979).
3. **Death Drive and Repetition** – Fascination with decay, surrender to annihilation (Freud, 1920/2003; Kristeva, 1982).

The graveyard scene literalizes repetition compulsion. Ophelia's death externalizes melancholic fragmentation. The duel enacts collapse of repression.

Delay, therefore, is not resolved but consummated. The prince acts only when the ego's protective structures disintegrate.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Hamlet's notorious delay is not the product of indecision, moral scruple, or philosophical overthinking, but rather a **structural inevitability rooted in the psychic architecture** elucidated by Classical Freudian psychoanalysis. Through the lenses of Oedipal identification, melancholic incorporation, and the death drive, the analysis establishes that Hamlet's paralysis is a manifestation of unresolved internal conflict. Claudius embodies the externalized fulfillment of Hamlet's repressed patricidal desire, while Gertrude represents the ambivalent maternal object whose sexuality and presence exacerbate psychic tension. Ophelia functions as a displaced object of libido and aggression, her death externalizing the consequences of repression and melancholia.

The interplay of **repetition compulsion** and obsession with death imagery underscores the operation of the death drive (Thanatos), revealing a compulsion toward self-destruction that structures the narrative. Hamlet's eventual act of revenge coincides with the collapse of ego defenses, demonstrating that resolution of repression occurs only under extreme psychic pressure. The graveyard scene and soliloquies illustrate how melancholic withdrawal, fixation on mortality, and internalized ambivalence shape both the trajectory and tempo of the plot, emphasizing that in *Hamlet*, **psychic forces drive action more decisively than conscious deliberation or external circumstances**.

Methodologically, this study highlights the efficacy of psychoanalytic textual hermeneutics for early modern drama, showing that classical Freudian theory remains a powerful tool for interpreting character motivation, dramatic structure, and thematic coherence. The findings also suggest avenues for

interdisciplinary inquiry, including affect theory, trauma studies, and performative studies of repression. Ultimately, the tragedy of *Hamlet* is both narrative and psychic: the prince's delay and the play's catastrophic conclusion reflect the inexorability of unconscious structures, offering a model for reading Shakespearean tragedy as the manifestation of **intrapsychic inevitability intersecting with historical and cultural circumstances**.

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