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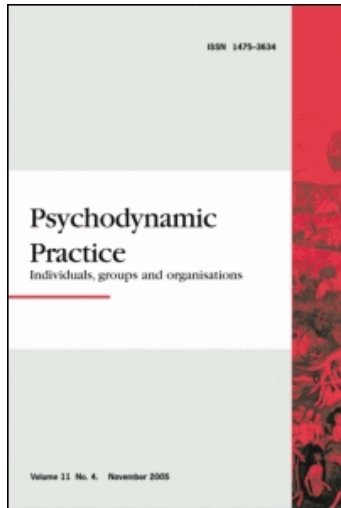
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OPEN SPACE

How might Hamlet help to educate psychotherapists?

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One of the most important child psychotherapists in Britain, Margaret Rustin, writes of a boy in therapy with her:

The technical problem of working with him was when and how to find a spark of life in a therapeutic relationship, which appeared to him to be another of the meaningless arrangements made for him by kindly but remote professionals, whose purposes he could not fathom (Rustin, 2001, p. 274).

Although it is far from unusual in psychoanalysis to speak of ‘technique’ and ‘technical problems’, it is not clear that it is unproblematic to talk and think about this as a ‘technical problem’. I do not think it helps to say that ‘technical’ here has a ‘technical meaning’. It is possible to argue that to the extent that we approach ‘getting through’ to a child as a ‘technical problem’, we show that we are just another remote professional. For this term betrays something about the way we are trying to approach our client. What Rustin shows us here is her imaginative and courageous engagement with this boy, rather than an ability to locate and deploy the correct technique.

The imagination, thoughtfulness and courage of a therapist are what attracts me, humbles me and makes me feel that I am learning something about how one person may be of help to another. I do not think that work of such quality is a natural consequence of being trained to identify the ‘technical problems’. I suspect that good work in psychotherapy comes from the practitioner’s humanity, from sensitivity, from a habit of thoughtfulness that can be cultivated, given the right sort of experiences, by a good education.

A time may come when it seems obvious to people who are involved in psychotherapy, whether as clients, therapists, students or educators, that the notion of people being ‘trained’ to be psychotherapists raises some important questions. One of these questions is whether therapy is largely or

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simply a technical matter, for which people need to be adequately ‘trained’, or whether to talk about it as if it is like this is a confusing and misleading way of thinking and speaking about the subtleties and complexities of human conversations or interactions. Even if it is accepted that all therapists and related practitioners – whether hypnotherapists, practitioners of Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing [EMDR] or of Reike, Scientologists or Fortune Tellers – need to be trained so that they master and can therefore apply a set of interrelated concepts and ideas, need to be inducted into a way of seeing and thinking – it is still possible to take the view that with the ‘talking’ therapies, or, more accurately, the exploratory conversational therapies – for all therapies involve talking or gesturing – ‘training’ is not enough. It is not enough to ‘train’ a practitioner so that he can apply ideas from one or two or many psychotherapeutic theories or approaches: therapists also need to be educated about psychotherapy, and about people, in the way that good literature helps to educate us about being a person. As well as not being enough, ‘training’ might be too much and might get in the way of being able to listen to and respond to another human being.

We might begin to expect and encourage our students to develop a critical view of what they are being taught, to develop a historical sense about this thing called ‘psychotherapy’, as well as some sense of the philosophical and political issues involved in it. Being educated in or about psychotherapy would involve discouraging narrowness in would-be-therapists. By this I do not mean that a student might be expected to know about Klein as well as about Freud: to take the bus into the neighbouring street is not to become a citizen of the world. I think it is important that students acquire some appreciation of the importance and inescapability of philosophical ideas and positions in psychotherapeutic theories and practice, but here I want to claim that great literature may have a part to play in helping to ‘educate’ rather than ‘train’ therapists, and, in particular, that reading and discussing *Hamlet* as a group may be a very rich and rewarding experience for a students of psychotherapy.

Hamlet’s situation and interpretations

I will not try to summarize the play but will give the barest reminder or prompt. Hamlet sees what appears to be the ghost of his recently-deceased father. Hamlet’s uncle, his father’s brother, is now married to Hamlet’s mother. The ghost tells Hamlet that his uncle, the current king, murdered him and beguiled his mother. The ghost urges him to take revenge. Hamlet does not do this.

Many things have been said about his not taking revenge. For example, his failing as a tragic hero – his fatal flaw – is said to be that he is a procrastinator. Freud, in *The interpretation of dreams*, claims that Hamlet is

unable to act because of his own repressed childhood wishes to do away with his father and take his father's place with his mother: Hamlet's Oedipus Complex. He cannot take revenge on his uncle because he feels himself to be as bad as his uncle. Hamlet, therefore, reproaches himself rather than takes revenge (Freud, 1991, pp. 366–368).

A group of therapists or therapists-to-be might busy themselves with looking for the evidence for such assertions and consider if what Freud says about the play seems to be arbitrary and tendentious, designed to advance the cause of psychoanalysis. I am certainly not suggesting that we try to impose a psychoanalytic or any other psychotherapeutic interpretation on this play, and that this is the way to 'educate' students. In fact my claim is that to read a work of great literature, or to listen to a case presentation and then fit the words and events into a theory is more consistent with what is usually referred to as 'training'. It is a procrustean attempt to fit what we see and hear into what we believe or what is familiar, and this is headed in the opposite direction to where I think that great literature may take us: that is, to some sense of wonder, some sense of where our knowing ends, and humility rather than hubris about our theories.

I am not arguing that there is absolutely no place for tendentious or forced reading of literature in order to help the student to 'get' something he or she is struggling to 'understand'. I am arguing that these sorts of readings are always questionable. How difficult is it, if one looks hard enough, to find something in literature that might seem to support one's own position? Is there something suspect in implicitly or explicitly claiming that Sophocles or Shakespeare have made the same observations or have had the same insights as the theory that one is trying to promote, that they are proto-versions of what one is? Instead of being used to return us to a theory or to support an approach in psychotherapy, to close down the meaning and significance of what we hear or read, great literature may entice us to leave the security of our theories and our prejudices and consider the issues the work puts before us. Hamlet may help us to appreciate that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

Might it be possible for a group of psychotherapists to read *Hamlet* without speculation about whether his not taking bloody revenge is an indication that something must have been amiss in his early life? We could speculate about Hamlet's attachment to his father here, talk about ambivalence – his hating as well as loving his father, which is supposed to account for his not taking revenge on his father's murderer, but it is difficult to find anything in the text that supports this sort of speculation. I am not writing about being 'evidence based': it is about being attentive to what you actually see and hear, and being wary about imposing your own favourite stories on what is in front of you.

***Hamlet* as a study of madness**

Students of psychotherapy may be presented with *Hamlet* as a study of madness. While it is certainly clear that Ophelia goes mad, and that the king is afflicted, it is not clear that Hamlet is mad. Is he mad or feigning madness? Therapists and therapists-to-be may wish to consider how such a judgement may be made, and whether in their work they do or will find themselves trying to decide if a client or patient is really mad or just pretending to be so, why they would pretend to be, and how important it is to be able to make this distinction. Whatever verdict may be returned on Hamlet's sanity, it is clear that this play presents us with an example of mourning, trauma and despair. Hamlet's father is dead. He thinks that his mother has married his father's murderer, his father's own brother, and now he feels that he should do what a dutiful son in his time and of his birth would do, that is to murder his uncle. Hamlet is, like our clients and like us, caught up in events that precede him that he cannot quite understand or be confident about. We can find ourselves caught up in terrible things, with no attractive alternatives.

Words

We do not speak English as Shakespeare spoke it in his time, but without being able to follow every single word we are able to follow what is happening. This seems to me to be not unlike the situation with some clients in particular, where you can get the gist of what they are saying but you are puzzled by how they use many of the words they use, where you may have a sense of being with the person but of not understanding many of the words they use. It seems to be a useful exercise for therapists and therapists-to-be to see what they can make of this sixteenth century English.

There are many complicated exchanges and relationships in this play. There are tricks, plots, strategies, but none of the characters can speak a language of 'technical problems' when considering their relationship with someone else. The Bard cannot put such a term in the mouths of his characters, for he is not in the power of that science-worshipping spirit that sees science as the arbiter of sense, and aspires to reduce everything to a 'technical problem', solvable only in the language of science because it is only intelligible in such a language. There is beauty in the words, drama, wit, irony. People are involved with each other; no one is able to take up the position of the disinterested observer. The poet does not try to explain too much about his characters and the events that they are caught up in. What we see is what there is.

Hamlet is reading a book. Polonius asks Hamlet, 'What do you read, my lord?'. Hamlet replies, 'Words, words, words'. We and Hamlet read words, we hear words as we see and hear the accompanying gestures, the

intonations, the spaces between the words, the comportment of the body of the person uttering the words. Students of psychotherapy may wish to consider whether we ever get behind and beyond the words into what the person really means and feels, or whether we can only witness and respond to more words and their accompanying gestures? Perhaps a therapist might learn something from Hamlet about being sensitive to, paying more attention to words and gestures, rather than worry about whether it supports any particular theory, or about what Shakespeare really meant by this play. Hamlet's instructions to the player about making the word and the emotion fit may be, for example, a useful thing for therapists to think about.

There is much in the play about deception and seduction. Words usually play the central role in this. I think that the way in which the king is said to have killed Hamlet's father, by what seems to be the ghost of Hamlet's father, is far from insignificant: by pouring poison into his ear. Psychotherapists may wish to discuss what they understand by this. The medical opinion I have sought about this tells me that there is not very much that will actually poison a human being if it is administered through the ear; but words do a fine job here. Usually, daily, human beings poison and corrupt each other with words. We destroy or corrupt another's peace of mind, sense of proportion, good humour or even temper. The king somehow poisons his brother – Hamlet's father – he pours poison into the ear of Hamlet's mother, so she is seduced and her judgement is impaired. She marries the murderer before her husband is cold in the ground, and thus the throne, which should have passed to Hamlet, goes to the uncle who murdered the legitimate king. Laertes also has poison poured into him from the king's words and actions. At the end of the play we see that many die from poison.

Hamlet seems to be concerned that the spirit that seems to be the ghost of his father is something that is trying to pour poison into *his* ear. Therapists may wish to consider whether Hamlet 'fails' to act – the word is of course important – or whether he is to be admired for not acting. That is, for suspecting that the ghost may be an evil spirit, or may be a manifestation of his grief, and so in either case, he would be deceived, beguiled or poisoned into doing something terrible. Is it possible to read Hamlet as suffering from the poison that is around him but not succumbing to it? Not dishing it out, not murdering. Do we need to think about how often in Shakespeare do poisonous words lead to terrible deeds? Would we say that Othello was right and Hamlet was wrong? What would we say to Hamlet if he consulted us and told us of his thoughts about killing his uncle because he believes that his uncle murdered his father? How would we respond to his telling us that he knows this to be so because his father's ghost told him so?

Hamlet would not be 'passion's slave' (*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene ii). Perhaps we might think about this in the context of the young men some of

us see who seem to be slaves to their passions and their appetites. They must have revenge, they must have what they want. Therapists may wish to think again about Hamlet's so-called 'procrastination' and 'failure to act' and wonder if this is what we are trying to do with at least some of our clients.

It is clear that human beings can be and often are deceived or seduced by each other and by themselves. Hamlet would not be deceived. Reading Hamlet gives therapists or would-be-therapists an opportunity to reflect on how easily we are deceived and seduced not only by others but by ourselves. Our needs and our vanities listen and speak. We may wonder about how much we are seduced and convinced by our teachers, our theories, our generalizations, how safe, powerful and important we feel when we can present ourselves to others and to ourselves as knowing about people or 'the mind', with little thought that we too are persons and supposedly use our 'minds' to know 'minds'. How can we know whether the person who is speaking is telling us the truth, even when we are the person speaking?

Philosophy

Students of psychotherapy may be able to move from seeing Hamlet as failing to do something, to becoming intrigued by what he manages to do. This is not simply a reminder to the therapist to consider what the person or event is, rather than what we would like it to be or think that it should be – for client and therapists too often need to be reminded – it is because Hamlet has achieved something remarkable. For much of the play, he is contemplating the senselessness of human life. His father kills someone, someone kills his father, he kills this person, someone else may kill him, but what is the point? Where is the sense in all of this? Hamlet does not pursue bloody revenge, nor is he poisoned by his meditation on life. Towards the end of the play he is remarkably free from resentment of life. He is not afraid of death either, stating that if it does not come now, it will come later; if it is not to come, it will be now. He is able to 'Let be' or 'let it be' (Act V, Scene ii, lines 209–212, and 327).

Some of us work with families who are locked in feuds that seem to go back further than anyone can really remember or account for, young men who are preoccupied with revenge for the smallest slight, people who are consumed with resentment of the hand that fate has dealt them. I shall not try to write about the parts of the world in which tit-for-tat revenge destroys more lives than anyone is able to count, or that each day seems to bring this world closer to our world. I want to say that grief and pain hidden by thoughts of revenge or actual acts of revenge, and people stuck in resentment about how their life has been, are met with regularly in the consulting room. How do we help our clients to forego, see past, not to take refuge in revenge and resentment? *Hamlet* may not tell us how to do this for

all or even for one but it seems to show us one person somehow managing to do this, and perhaps it will help us to think about how we might help clients along the path that leads to deliverance from resentment.

Hamlet is a philosopher. It is easy to quip that this is why he cannot come to a decision and act, but perhaps to recourse to such a cliché betrays the fact that one knows little about philosophers, for there are many, both ancient and modern, who were far from unable to decide what to do with themselves, who made music, danced, dared to hold tyrants and generals in conversation about their shortcomings, fought in wars, refused to be spared hardship if this meant leaving others to suffer it alone, chose death rather than a life that seemed not to belong to them, and decided to resign posts as academic philosophers. Perhaps a group of therapists studying *Hamlet* together might wonder what significance to give to his being a philosopher. Shakespeare presents him as a noble soul. Hamlet has quite a bit to say about 'man' and his dishonesty, his baseness, the smiling villains, the slaves of passions, the lack of honour and dignity. Why did Shakespeare present him thus and have him say such things? We may want to ask what, if anything, his being a philosopher has to do with his views and his actions, and what is Shakespeare's attitude to philosophy? Has Hamlet been educated by philosophy, and if so what kind of philosophy? Students of psychotherapy may leave *Hamlet* wondering what philosophy has to do with Hamlet's behaviour and character, and hence his education. They might leave the play wondering whether it seems to be a sustained inquiry into life, and noting how much questioning and searching for answers there is in it.

Might a student or two wonder about another philosopher – one who might be said to have 'failed' to escape from death when he was given the opportunity to do so – and whether the Socratic method and dialogue has anything at all to do with *Hamlet*. Socrates did not 'fail' to escape from prison; it was important to him not to escape, although he had the power and the possibility to do so. Both he and Hamlet seem to have the power to do what they refrain from doing: they may have the strength of giants, but they do not live as wanton giants, doing just what they are able to get away with. His not doing what most would do in his situation might be regarded as a success: to not do what those around us would do, to pause and think about the deed, how just it is, irrespective of whether others take it as just and acceptable, to worry about our warrant for the deed and the sort of person such a deed would make us, these are the sorts of 'failures' of which we have much need. We could see the history of philosophy from Socrates through to Nietzsche, Derrida and Levinas as attempts to arrange and encourage such 'failures'. Psychotherapy along with philosophy and literature can help to facilitate and encourage these 'failures'.

This might be a doorway for some into considering the relationship between philosophy, education and therapy. Perhaps some will be interested in the doorway; perhaps most will not be. However, to leave the play with

such thoughts is better than to be left repeating the usual comments about Hamlet's procrastination, and better than simply having used what is arguably the best play in English to support one's favourite psychotherapeutic theory.

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