

MIRROR TO NATURE

DRAMA, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOCIETY



MARGARET RUSTIN & MICHAEL RUSTIN

MIRROR TO NATURE

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MIRROR TO NATURE

Drama, Psychoanalysis, and Society

Margaret Rustin, Michael Rustin

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Since it was founded in 1920, the Tavistock Clinic has developed a wide range of therapeutic approaches to mental health which have been strongly influenced by the ideas of psychoanalysis. It has also adopted systemic family therapy as a theoretical model and a clinical approach to family problems. The Clinic is now the largest training institution in Britain for mental health, providing postgraduate and qualifying courses in social work, psychology, psychiatry, and child, adolescent, and adult psychotherapy, as well as in nursing and primary care. It trains about 1,400 students each year in over 45 courses.

The Clinic's philosophy aims at promoting therapeutic methods in mental health. Its work is founded on the clinical expertise that is also the basis of its consultancy and research activities. The aim of this Series is to make available to the reading public the clinical, theoretical, and research work that is most influential at the Tavistock Clinic. The Series sets out new approaches in the understanding and treatment of psychological disturbance in children, adolescents, and adults, both as individuals and in families.

Mirror to Nature embodies a central and time-honoured aspect of the Clinic's work—the importance of bringing together insight

into the inner world of the individual and the family with specificities of time, place, ethnicity, and culture. As the first book in the new Tavistock/Karnac Series, it marks a significant extension of the scope of the Series into broader areas of the humanities, locating clinical experience within literary, social, historical, and political domains.

In this volume, Margaret and Michael Rustin offer an exciting and original study. Encompassing the development of drama from Greek tragedy to contemporary theatre, they explore the multi-fold relationships between a psychoanalytic perspective on the protagonists' unconscious impulses and desires (especially within marriage and between parent and child) and a broader contextual picture of the historical and ideological determinants of the action. The special combined expertise that the authors bring to their undertaking provides fresh illumination on a number of major works from within the classical dramatic canon, thorough intimacy with the psychoanalytic framework constantly informing and being informed by an acute sociological awareness.

Nicholas Temple and Margot Waddell
Series Editors

PREFACE

This book has arisen from a class we have conducted for nearly a decade as part of the Tavistock Clinic and University of East London's Masters in Psychoanalytic Studies programme. For a term in each year, we have been exploring the meanings of a number of plays with successive groups of students who have been remarkably enthusiastic about both psychoanalysis and drama and their connections. We are also long-term theatre-goers and have gained much from that experience, in settings as varied, over the years, as major London theatres such as the Almeida, the National, and the Royal Shakespeare Company, the outstanding travelling companies such as "Cheek By Jowl" that we have seen at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, and elsewhere, our excellent local Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, and many of the tiny theatres of the London fringe. Nor do we forget the experience of seeing our children perform in the musical theatre of Malorees Junior Primary School, of a productive academic association with the East Fifteen Acting School, then directed by its founder Margaret Walker, when its courses were first given academic recognition by the University of East London, and of seeing our friends Tony and Elizabeth Evans develop from scratch in Great

Livermere's village hall an admirable amateur company, Theatre 85, which now performs, to a high standard, at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, twice per year. All these and many more experiences of theatre have informed and stimulated our thinking.

We bring different backgrounds to this project. One of us is a child psychotherapist, the other a sociologist. Neither of us, as may be regrettably evident to some readers, has any formal academic training in literature or drama. This is, however, our second exercise in this field in intellectual "trespassing", to borrow Albert O. Hirschman's expressive term (Hirschman, 1981). In 1987 we first published *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction*, which explored that genre of writing in a similarly interdisciplinary way. (This has just been republished in a new edition.) At around that time, in 1984–85, one of us was given a research fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton to study drama, and this book is in part a belated accomplishment of what was begun by both of its authors in that year.

We are grateful to Margot Waddell and Graham Martin for reading the manuscript of the book and offering us valuable advice. We would, finally, like to thank many colleagues and friends, at the Tavistock Clinic, the University of East London, the British Psychoanalytical Society, the Association of Child Psychotherapists, the Raymond Williams Society, and the journal *Soundings*, for their interest in and support for this project.

MIRROR TO NATURE

. . . the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now,
was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show vir-
tue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body
of the time his form and pressure.

Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2

Introduction: theatre, mind, and society

Our particular interest in the plays we discuss in this book is in the states of mind and feeling, enacted through relationships, that they represent and explore on stage. We hold that from the Greeks onwards drama has been one of the primary symbolic forms in which emotional experience has been articulated in Western culture. Audiences have been continually drawn to the drama as a space for discovery and reflection, and authorities have been drawn to control the dangerous space of the theatre through censorship.

We are also deeply interested in psychoanalysis, whose subject-matter is the understanding of states of mind and feeling, in particular as these arise in the primary relationships of generation and gender, in families and their equivalents. One purpose of this book is to draw on the perspectives and insights of psychoanalysis in reflecting upon representative and admired works of classical theatre.

We consider plays by eight dramatists, stretching in their chronology from Euripides to Pinter. Although our choice of writers and plays may seem unsurprising—even conventional—to those familiar with the mainstream tradition of the theatre, it is also

unavoidably somewhat arbitrary. We are plainly not attempting to produce a historical or explanatory survey of the drama. Instead, we have chosen to explore a number of plays by significant writers, to see whether an approach and a method can be developed that bring together our understandings of contemporary psychoanalytic thinking with this dramatic tradition. If what we have to say about these plays is of interest, then it should be possible to extrapolate this way of thinking to other works. At any rate, that is our hope.

The passion for truth in drama and psychoanalysis

We believe, with many other writers on drama, that great drama has always been driven by “a passion for truth”.¹ This has also been the goal of psychoanalysis, from its founding by Freud onwards. It is significant that Freud saw in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* something similar to the psychoanalytic process. “The action of the play”, he wrote, “consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta” (Freud, 1900a, pp. 261–262). For Freud, not only does *Oedipus the King* provide a dramatic representation of one of the foundational issues of human consciousness—the repression of primary desires—it also reveals the potential for catastrophe inherent in attempting to bring these to awareness. He sees the poet, like the psychoanalyst, “compelling us to recognise our own inner minds, in which the same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found” (p. 263). His reference to

¹ “The driving force of the great naturalist drama was not the reproduction of rooms or dress or conversation on the stage. It was a passion for truth, in strictly human and contemporary terms. Whatever the later arguments, about particular conventions, it was the decisive moment, in all modern drama” (Raymond Williams, 1968, p. 385). Williams had particularly in mind here the revolution effected by Ibsen.

the fierce conflicts provoked by this insight suggests his identification with the great dramatist as the discoverer of unwelcome truths.

It was Aristotle's view (Aristotle, 1951) that poetry, including in particular the tragic plays that held such a significant position in the cultural life of Greek cities, was a crucial means of exploring reality, notably the reality of human motivation. He distinguished between the truth of particulars—the contingent facts of the everyday world, which could be represented by literal description—and universal truths, which could only be grasped by the identification of what was typical or essential. The truth established by poetry was the discovery of the universal in this sense.

Drama, according to Aristotle, depended above all on the "action" it represented. In work of substance, there are relations of necessity between the elements of an action, and this rule of necessity applies also to character. Characters do what they do because they must—that is to say, because their nature, or the interaction of their natures, makes this unavoidable. The elaboration of feelings, desires, and beliefs in characters, and the elaboration of their circumstances, are important because they clarify the "necessity" of their actions.

Psychoanalysis has also always been occupied, in its quite different way, with explaining the necessity of human actions—that is, with understanding how and why one action or state of mind follows from another, and in particular what unrecognized beliefs, desires, or compulsions make people do what they do, even sometimes seemingly against their will or against their better nature. The essential structure of a psychoanalytic case-study (and clinical case-studies have always been the building blocks of psychoanalytic knowledge, from Freud's famous case-studies onwards) is an investigation into the coherence and necessary connection of the different aspects of the self and its history, including the history of what has happened within the psychoanalytic process itself.

The written presentation and report of psychoanalytic cases is invariably highly selective. Usually, particular details—a crucial event in childhood, a revealing dream, a preoccupying symptom, a moment of recognition, understanding, or emotional change—are chosen for elaboration, and a narrative is constructed by the psychoanalytic writer suggesting how these details disclose an under-

lying pattern or a relation to an underlying theoretical model. Psychoanalysts differ about whether what they are seeking to find in these investigations are connections of cause and effect, or of meaning and coherence. But some notion of necessity—of what broader pattern has to be understood in order to make sense of the particulars of the patients' experience—is central to psychoanalytic writing and discovery.

Of all literary forms, drama is perhaps the most condensed and selective in its representation of human action. In three hours or so of performance we might see the struggles of a ruling dynasty, the experience of a crisis in an individual's life, or the breakdown of a family and its relationships. Sometimes, in Greek and Shakespearean drama, all these dimensions are present in the same play. To achieve this compression and yet demonstrate the necessity and connectedness of what happens on the stage, dramatists and performers need to be acutely sensitive to the significance of every possible detail, in the many dimensions of plot, character, setting, and in the forms of communication through speech, image, and gesture that sustain these.

It is because plays are such a condensed form that they give rise to so many different possibilities for interpretation—many of their implications are inevitably latent rather than manifest in the text. There are similarities between the combination of significant detail with an essential connectedness in the procedures of the dramatist and those of the psychoanalyst. In thinking about plays, and in thinking about the process of psychoanalysis, we have not felt that we were engaging in entirely divergent activities, even though we should stress that our interest in drama and its characters is not primarily from a clinical perspective. We try to demonstrate what qualities and experiences the characters in drama have in common with other human beings, not what is especially pathological about them. Indeed, psychoanalysis has always sought to establish the universality of the conflicts and difficulties found within human character and to undermine complacent distinctions between the normal and the abnormal.

In psychoanalysis and drama, understanding depends on remaining close to the language of a play or a patient, respectively, and only with reluctance and caution moving beyond this into more abstract and theoretical ways of thinking. In psychoanalysis,

communication between analyst and patient can only take place when properly rooted in the language that the patient uses.² We have found it essential, in thinking about the plays we discuss, to remain as close as possible to their texts and to ground what we say as much as possible in the language of the text itself.³ This does not mean that our “readings” are theoretically innocent or uninformed, since there is no doubt that our perspectives have been deeply shaped by the psychoanalytic and other conceptions with which we are familiar. But it does mean that it has often seemed unhelpful to introduce explicitly theoretical concepts into our analysis of the plays. Where we have done so, it has been simply to make the basis of our thinking more visible to our readers.

There are some other respects in which our purpose may be clarified by reference to Aristotle’s theory of poetry. The first of these concerns the ways in which tragedy, in his view, is a way of exploring the contradictions of human experience, the terrible collisions that take place between conflicting aspects of human nature, or between what is desired and what is possible in human lives.⁴ The central concern of psychoanalysis has also been with the question of how to live—or, more precisely, how to live without excessive mental pain or catastrophe to the self and others. The “extreme” states of mind that psychoanalysis has sought to investigate, map, and relieve or modify in its therapeutic role are analogous to the “extreme” states of mind that are the subject of many of

² This is especially the case in the psychoanalysis of children, since child patients rarely read psychoanalytic books and are unlikely to be tempted into conversational “excursions” (O’Shaughnessy, 1993) or into theoretical discussion with their therapists.

³ Sometimes we fear that our citing of textual “evidence” for our interpretations may seem laborious, especially to readers already familiar with the works we discuss. But we are not literary specialists, and we felt that the greater danger for us was to appear to be offering interpretations that had no foundation.

⁴ Aristotle puts this in terms of what will arouse pity and terror in the audience. This, he says, should arise “from the inner structure of the piece”. “It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty” (*Poetics*, XIII). “The conflicts to be looked for from the poet are between people who are near or dear to one another—if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of this kind is done—these are the situations to be looked for by the poet.” (*Poetics*, XIV).

the greatest plays of the Western dramatic tradition, some of which we discuss in the ensuing chapters.

Although we believe there are convergences and affinities between the “objects of inquiry” of psychoanalysis and of dramatic and other literary forms, there are also important differences between them. Drama achieves its truths to experience, and its meanings for audiences, by embodying its understandings in an imaginative construction of a world. It does not, usually, describe, theorize, or comment in “objective” terms on what it realizes in this “fictional” form, though many dramatists, including some of those we discuss here, have done this outside their dramatic work, in commentary on it.⁵

Psychoanalysis, and sociology (another of the explanatory paradigms on which we draw), do work by explicit description, categorization, and the clarification of law-like connections between phenomena, even when they seek to ground their accounts on particular truthful accounts of the actual experiences of their subjects. Drama and social scientific analysis, therefore, generate rather different forms of understanding, even if the substantive insights they provide may coincide. Drama creates imaginary worlds, from which learning among audiences and readers takes place implicitly, by the carrying over of understandings gained from a play to fields of experience beyond it. Psychoanalysis is located unusually far along the expressive and imaginative end of the continuum between the forms of knowledge usually contrasted as the sciences and the humanities.⁶ But even so, the convergences and affinities between the truths of human nature and society that have been discovered by psychoanalysis and those that have been represented and realized in drama, and the influences of these

⁵ Some dramatists—Shaw for example—have incorporated such explicit commentary within their plays. Others, like Brecht, have sought to provoke their audiences into a measure of detached intellectual awareness of the dramatic effects they were using, though without eschewing more emotionally direct kinds of engagement by audiences.

⁶ Michael Rustin deals with these issues in a number of essays (see *Reason and Unreason: Psychoanalysis, Science and Politics*, 2001; *The Good Society and the Inner World*, 1991a).

traditions on each other,⁷ must not obscure the important differences of method that distinguish them.⁸

We have so far been considering the connections between Aristotle's theory of poetry and psychoanalysis from the point of view of the "production" of both these forms of understanding and knowledge. There is also something to be said about their "reception" by audiences, in the case of theatre, and by those who experience psychoanalysis in its various forms as analysands or in some related way.⁹ What connection might there be between these? Relevant to understanding this is Aristotle's concept of catharsis, as the most important response of audiences to tragedy.

Although Aristotle elaborated this influential idea rather little, some elements of what he meant are clear. He describes an experience for audiences of pity and terror at the events enacted on stage,

⁷In the earlier years of psychoanalysis, the principal direction of influence was from imaginative literature, since its traditions had anticipated many of the insights into human feeling and motivation that psychoanalysis was trying to bring within the domain of science. But subsequently, certainly so far as the novel and cinema are concerned, the influence has gone in both directions, as psychoanalytic ways of thinking have come to pervade the entire culture of the west.

⁸Meg Harris Williams and Margot Waddell have persuasively argued, in *The Chamber of Maiden Thought* (1991), that the tradition of English poetry from Shakespeare onwards and the psychoanalytic writing, especially of Bion, articulate similar conceptions of imagination and creativity as the foundations of mind. There is weight in this argument, which gains support from the actual influence of this literary tradition on modern psychoanalysis. (See also Britton, 1998.) There are, however, significant differences between the embodiment or realization of a conception of mind in literature and a discursive or theoretical account of it. Psychoanalysis works in both modes, the analytic process and its descriptions combining elements of imaginative as well as theoretical writing. But while modern psychoanalysis has been substantially nourished by literary conceptions of these kinds, its theoretical articulation provides a dimension that is otherwise lacking in imaginative representations of creativity ("the Vale of Soul-Making"), which illuminate by realized example rather than discursive argument. The earlier absence of such theory may be one reason for the gulf between scientific theories of mind and literature. The development of a psychoanalytic theory of mind may make possible some better bridge between them.

⁹Psychoanalytically based observation of infants or children, and group relations events, are now common modes of non-clinical experience of psychoanalysis.

and he considered this to be potentially transformative for them. It seems from what he had to say about the truth-bearing qualities of poetry and the element of “necessity” that held together the action of major plays, that there must be important elements of both understanding and emotion in his view of audience response. Audiences learn, and are transformed to some degree, by an experience of being induced or enabled to think in a context of strong emotional identification and engagement. Neither emotion nor abstract thought, by themselves, adequately describes this experience. Indeed, one can readily see that emotion by itself connotes superficial or sentimental theatre, and a wholly intellectual approach seems incompatible with an experience that is genuinely theatrical at all.

Catharsis, understood in these terms, is very close to the conception of “learning from experience” central to contemporary British psychoanalytic practice. Indeed, one might say that this psychoanalytic conception now offers a new resource for understanding what “catharsis” might mean in the theatre of today. This theory differentiates between “knowing”, understood as reflecting on an emotional experience with which a person is in contact, and “knowing about”, as a dissociated cognitive experience in which feelings are kept at a distance. The psychoanalytic process, and its therapeutic and observational derivatives, involves exposure to an emotionally significant experience, through the “transference relationship” in its various forms.¹⁰ It is this “learning through feeling” that gives the psychoanalytic method its distinctive power and depth. This is also what makes psychoanalysis an ongoing process in which the interaction of two persons, and their conscious and unconscious responses to one another, is itself the subject-matter of their encounter and the basis for reflection and interpretation. What happens is that on the one hand analyst and analysand learn what *is*—what is fundamental and formative for the patient. This may itself be a relief, in so far as understanding what *is* really the case, rather than what is merely feared or believed to be, often provides solace of some kind. But additionally, such realization

¹⁰ By the transference relationship is meant the evocation of unconscious feeling focused on the analyst and deemed to be indicative of the “internal” states of mind and feeling of the analysand.

may bring change, and a capacity to move, in feeling. This conception of self-understanding can be viewed as a kind of freeing of the self through understanding, consonant with Spinoza's view (Spinoza, 1963).

The idea that significant change in the self often has both an intellectual and an emotional and relational dimension may explain why the public symbolic space of the theatre has had importance and influence as a "mirror of the times", and as a register of new feelings and identities. It is not only a public symbolic space, but a space that powerfully brings together cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions, the last of these through relationships of transference and identification between audience and characters.

Psychoanalysis, art, and culture

Central to psychoanalysis from its beginnings has been the idea that unconscious desires and states of mind find expression in symbolic form, primarily through dreams—Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a) is the founding text of psychoanalysis—but also through cultural forms. Freud believed that the sublimation of drives and desires through art, science, and culture was the highest form of life, equated by him with civilization itself:

No feature, . . . seems better to characterise civilisation than its esteem and encouragement of man's higher mental activities—his intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements—and the leading role that it assigns to ideas in human life. [Freud, 1930a, p. 94]

Later psychoanalytic writing in the Kleinian tradition has assigned an even greater importance to symbolic capacities as means by which psychic integration and development are achieved. In this tradition, "symbol formation" is associated with the capacity to acknowledge the reality and complexity of other human subjects. One of the principal functions of art, according to Hanna Segal (1952),¹¹ is to effect symbolic reparation to objects damaged by

¹¹ See also other essays on these issues in Segal (1986, 1997).

destructive impulses.¹² A function of art and culture, for writers in this tradition, is to establish a community of understanding between artist and audience, in which what is shared is an appreciation of the reality and value of vulnerable aspects of their world. Art and culture, in this perspective, depend for their creation both on a tenacious commitment to the “reality principle” and on the prevalence of love over hate in the self’s relation to its objects. The arts and the sciences are also the most developed expressions of the “epistemophilic instinct”—that is, the human drive to comprehend our world—and they represent mental functions at their most complex. This contemporary psychoanalytic approach reinforces Freud’s own commitment to art and culture as primary sources of understanding and of human values.¹³

The post-Kleinian tradition has given increasing attention to the “epistemophilic instinct” described by Klein (1930) as an innate appetite for knowledge—in its theory and practice. Klein, like Freud (1905d) before her, thought that this innate desire to know was evoked directly in the infant’s experience of his parents. The early sexual curiosity that Freud scandalously (in the view of many of his contemporaries) assigned to infants was further explored by Klein and her colleagues, who gave greater emphasis than did Freud to its negative and destructive aspects. The struggle between the impulses of love and hate, and the role of a “containing environment” in determining the balance between them, is viewed in the Kleinian tradition as central to psychic development. Later, in the work of Bion (1959), the idea that the mind and its capacities might itself be a focus for internal attack became a further object of investigation, leading to greater understanding of psychotic states of mind, marked by the destruction of the reality sense and of the capacity to think. Bion argued that the containment of primitive mental states via understanding, most vitally within the mother—

¹² Adrian Stokes (1965, 1978), influenced by Kleinian ideas in the later period of his work, developed a theory of painting, sculpture, and architecture that drew attention to the functions of psychic attack and reparation in the construction of works of art.

¹³ A variation on this theme has been notably developed by Winnicott (1971) and Milner (1987). Their understanding of the nature and importance of cultural experience has been enormously influential, the evocative power of their writing serving to heighten the power of their arguments.

infant relationship, was the essential precondition of psychic integration and the growth of mind in infants. This idea of containment through understanding has become essential to the theorization of the psychoanalytic process itself, and it has had many extensions to wider relational and institutional settings. All of these concepts are important to our own attempts to offer a psychoanalytic interpretation of the plays that we discuss in this book.

Drama is one of the art forms to which psychoanalysts have given particular attention. Freud (1916d), Klein (1963), Ernest Jones (1949), Ella Freeman Sharpe (1950), Donald Meltzer (1994), and Bennett Simon¹⁴ (1988) are among those who have discussed major works in the classical dramatic tradition (see also Alford, 1993).¹⁵ Their interest in drama is similar to that developed in this book—namely, that its subject matter, from Sophocles onwards, has often been focused on the inner and unconscious dramas of the family—of the relations of gender and generation—and seems therefore to provide a privileged access to understanding its essential aspects. For example, the sexual curiosity ascribed to infants by Freud (1905d, 1909b) and the epistemophilic instinct ascribed to them by Klein (1930) can be seen to find mature expression in classical drama, being represented both as the unconscious drives of characters (Oedipus, Electra, Orestes, etc.) and in the investigations of the dramatists whose imaginative creations these are. Similarly, we might see Harold Pinter as an explorer, on behalf of his audiences, of some of the more perverse and unwelcome realities of family life.

Drama and family

Of the many plays discussed in this book, all but one have as principal themes the relationships of partners within marriages—actual, anticipated, or failed—or between parents and children—

¹⁴ Bennett Simon's book *Tragic Drama and the Family* (1988) puts this argument in a particularly clear way, and has been a significant influence on our own work.

¹⁵ In *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (1993), C. Fred Alford views Greek tragedy as offering understandings that demand a rethinking of psychoanalytic thinking, partially reversing the usual direction of the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature.

actual, remembered, destroyed, or feared. Medea kills her children; Ion ends the play of that name with two parents whom he did not know before the play began; Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are probably the most notorious married couple in the history of the drama. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends with the joyful and simultaneous marriage of three couples. Ibsen's Hedda Gabler kills herself rather than have a child by a husband she does not love. John Gabriel Borkman kills himself when he understands that he has betrayed his love for one twin sister and married the other, for the sake of his ambition. Chekhov's *Three Sisters* live in mourning for their dead parents: one is unhappily married, one is abandoned by her lover, and one renounces marriage to look after the others. In *Uncle Vanya*, Sonya mourns her dead mother and Vanya his sister, and both are denied marriages of their own. Ranyevskaia in *The Cherry Orchard* is a mother who cannot provide for her children, and in this situation the marriage that her daughter Varya desires does not take place. Wilde, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, shows an "ideal marriage" nearly destroyed by the impact of the truth, but surviving to allow some emotional development to take place. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* grown-up children struggle with the consequences of having had parents who are entirely uninterested in them, but nevertheless luckily succeed in finding the marriage partners they believe they want. In Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, and in *A View from the Bridge*, all three central male figures—two of them fathers, one taking on the role of father to his niece—die, having failed in their all-important relationship to their children.

Perhaps less obviously, at the other end of the chronology of the plays we discuss, Beckett's *Happy Days* has a married couple on stage throughout, and in *Endgame* Hamm's aged parents inhabit dustbins and die during the action. In Pinter's *The Caretaker*, one character's mother has authorized the electro-convulsive therapy that has nearly destroyed his mind, and another character claims to have left his wife after two weeks of marriage. In *The Homecoming* a family of men frequently make reference to the wife and mother who has died years before; the play ends with the invitation to a sister-in-law to join this "home" in her place, abandoning her husband and children to do so. The only one of the plays we discuss in which these primary relationships of family are absent, *Waiting for*

Godot, takes place in a world in which families have disappeared, perhaps as a result of a devastation of some kind, and the only kinds of relationship that are left are between survivors who remain friends in spite of everything, and between a master and his slave.

The plays we have chosen focus on themes that are central ones for the Western dramatic tradition. In the Oedipus plays, in the plays about the successive catastrophes surrounding the House of Atreus, and in most of Shakespeare's work (even the history plays have this as one of their key dimensions¹⁶) we see how "familial" in its subject matter drama has always been. The Jacobean also explored family relationships, though in more perverse and extreme forms than did Shakespeare. Racine constructed tragedy from the contradictions between sexual passions and social rules. Restoration dramatists made comedies from the contradictions between affections and interests. Later, Strindberg, Lorca, Synge, O'Casey, and Friel, and the Americans O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Albee, and Mamet, explored tensions in the relations of generations, and between the sexes, which expose the structure of entire societies in different states of crisis. In sum, there seems little doubt that relations of gender and generation provide much of the primary subject matter for plays that make up the entire classical tradition of Western drama.

The relationships between the sexes, and between parents and children, are also, of course, a primary subject-matter of psychoanalysis. While the understanding of what happens in the conscious and unconscious interactions of members of the intimate family network has been developed substantially in the century since Freud's early writings, the importance accorded to unconscious phantasy and the belief that such phantasy defines the nature of what is now often called the "internal world" have remained fundamental.

In contemporary clinical approaches, the aim is not primarily to recover actual memories of early events or experiences. Rather, the idea is that the unconscious templates—or, in Joyce McDougall's

¹⁶ Prince Hal has to choose not only between indulgence and responsibility, but between a father to whom he is tied by duty and Falstaff, to whom he is joined by love.

(1986) term, unconscious “scripts”—that organize modes of feeling, thought, and action will be revealed in the intensity of the transference relationship with an analyst, and can be understood, and to some degree modified, as a consequence of the shared understanding achieved between analyst and analysand of what is happening within their relationship. [Other related contemporary formulations for these “unconscious templates” are “memories in feeling” (Klein, 1975), “internal working models” (Bowlby, 1981), and “internal representations” (Fonagy, 2001, pp. 118–119).¹⁷] The emphasis on the understanding of the transactions between analyst and patient in the “here-and-now” of the consulting-room is especially relevant to a psychoanalytically informed understanding of drama. Drama only succeeds if it is able to create interactions between characters in the “here-and-now” of the action on stage, as a number of dramatists, from Ibsen to Pinter, have memorably said in describing their own methods of writing.

We need to reflect on how it is that the themes of so much classical drama, and those of psychoanalytic investigation, overlap to such an extent. Although some might contend that this is a matter of perspective—the psychoanalytically minded seeing their own preoccupations reflected everywhere—the thematic evidence of this “convergence” does seem overwhelming. But before we answer this question, we should clarify some other aspects of our approach to these plays.

Structures of feeling

A second point of departure for our work has been our interest in Raymond Williams’s concept of “structures of feeling” as he developed this in the study of drama (Williams, 1961, 1966, 1968; Matthews, 2001). One of his concerns was to explore the evolution of dramatic form and its relationship to changing social relations and institutional practices. Although he wrote powerfully and insightfully about individual dramatists and particular plays, his broader subject was the investigation of genres and conventions in

¹⁷ The coexistence of these concepts, and their similar referents, signifies some convergence between psychoanalytic thinking and attachment theory.

drama and the kinds of expression of social experience and aspiration that they made possible or obstructed. The crucial concept of “culture” in Williams’s work signifies a practice of learning taking place within a whole society, and drama is an exemplary instance for him, not least because of its public nature, of how this learning is enabled to proceed by innovations in representative form and content.

The concept of “structure of feeling” deliberately yokes together apparently incompatible ideas: the rigidity and mechanistic quality of structures on the one hand, and the fluidity and evanescent quality of emotions on the other.¹⁸ Williams found this concept an essential analytic resource because he believed social and individual development to be the outcome of continuing tension and conflict between received ways of thinking, representation, and action and emergent aspirations and experiences which as yet lacked self-understanding or recognition. The concept of “structure of feeling” connotes the compromise established at any one time within the work of an individual writer—such as Ibsen, whose life-work Williams (1968) saw as embodying the potential of a new epoch of realist drama—or within a genre of playwriting, such as naturalism.

Williams was generally unsympathetic to what he saw as the doctrinal system of psychoanalysis, which he criticized as based on an unduly rigid and negative view of human possibility.¹⁹ But in reality, the commitment to “learning from experience” and to the facilitating “containment” of new thought in modern psychoanalytic practice is not far distant from Williams’s broader conception of the learning process embodied in culture. One reason for this is that both conceptions draw significant inspiration from literature, and from aspects of romanticism in particular. Our interest in

¹⁸ Williams deployed other attractively oxymoronic concepts, such as that of the “long revolution”, in his work. In fashioning these terms, Williams was attempting to transcend long-established contradictions and exclusions in received thinking and to create new openings in thought and social practice. His overriding commitment, embodied both in the idea of “structure of feeling” and “long revolution”, was to the development of a fully democratic culture.

¹⁹ Whereas Williams viewed psychoanalysis as upholding ideas close to those of original sin, we view it as a developmental humanism, grounded in realism.

drama as a public symbolic space that enables audiences and societies to learn, comparable to psychoanalysis as a private space that enables individuals—and by extension and the dissemination of ideas, societies—to learn, was influenced by Williams's work.

It is, however, clear that there is a considerable gulf between Williams's concept of "structures of feeling" as a description of states of social consciousness as these are reflected in drama (and in other cultural forms), and the idea of feeling as this might be used by psychoanalysts. Emotions in their broadest sense are certainly included in Williams's reflections on states of social consciousness, both in literature and in life, and he could be insightful and penetrating on the consequences for intimate relationships of prevailing social relations. But "intimate" emotions were simply not Williams's main interest. He was more concerned with the broader social relations of class and power, and it is these to which he mainly refers to explain the emergence or decline of dramatic conventions. One might explain Williams's particular focus of interest, and what it tended to leave out, by reference to his formation in a society still dominated by an ethos of production and collective kind of struggle, in contrast to the more individualized and feminized culture of recent decades.

This all means that while we have remained attentive to the broader social relations explored in these plays, and sometimes to the conflicts between emergent and dominant cultures that they reflect, we have needed to move beyond Williams's own frame of reference. Particularly central to the "social" dimension of our analyses has been the sphere of gender-relations and the representation of the usually subordinate experience of women. We argue that the social function of Western drama has been as much to give articulation and "voice" to female subjectivity and agency as to the suppressed agencies of class. Even *Macbeth* offers some compassionate insight into the plight of women in a male-dominated and violence-ridden society, though of course it has harsher insights to offer as well. We have also found it necessary to substantially elaborate and extend the descriptive and explanatory language implicit in the "feeling" component of "structures of feeling". Indeed, the thinness of Williams's theoretical vocabulary of feeling, not least in its unconscious aspects (whatever may be said about his interpretations of particular plays), is one of the weaknesses of

his approach. Since those concerned with the production and performance of plays must take an interest in the detailed dimensions of affect, relationship, and motivation in order to think out what they wish to represent, this relative lacuna in Williams's work may also have limited its influence on dramatic production. One reason why we have chosen to present our thinking in the form of detailed analyses of particular plays is because we think that the questions that occupy theatre directors and actors—what is going on in this scene, what is a character feeling, why does she do or say this or that?—are of such interest.²⁰

Families and societies

If we were one-dimensional and reductive in our approach to psychoanalysis and drama, we might be tempted to answer our own question about the remarkable convergence of thematic focus between drama and psychoanalysis without reference to any larger societal dimensions. There are fundamental facts of human nature, such an argument might go, and psychoanalysis and the classical drama have been primary forms of investigation of these. This would, however, just be to replace one dominant preoccupation—for example, with the relations of social class, or with changing dramatic conventions, or forms of rhetoric—with another exclusive focus, this time on “human nature”. This is not our intention—our object is to bring together different perspectives, not to pull them further apart.

What links a “sociological” interest in drama as an expression of social conflicts with a psychoanalytic interest in it as an exploration of primary relationships of sex and generation is the way in which such relationships are repeatedly represented in drama as crucial indicators of societal well-being or malaise. This connection is made in the earliest days of Western drama in the most forceful

²⁰ Incidentally, this is also the method we have adopted in the seminars we teach on Psychoanalysis and Drama, with postgraduate students of psychoanalytic studies. We have sought to work by reflecting on the meanings of a particular play, for ourselves and our students, and to proceed to make theoretical links only from this basis.

way by Sophocles, in *Oedipus the King*. Thebes has been brought to the edge of disaster by the unwitting violation by Oedipus of the “natural laws” prohibiting parricide and incest, and only if this can be recognized and admitted can the city be saved.

These connections continued to be a central theme—perhaps even *the* central theme—of drama thereafter. The most intense and powerful means of exploring a social crisis that were available to a dramatist remained the representation of its implications for the most primary relationships. This is not, of course, to argue that family relations are the source of all good and evil in society. It is, rather, that they are among the most sensitive barometers of societies’ capacities to care for their members. It is bloody war that sets the Macbeths off on their cruel course, and it is a decaying economic and social order that leaves Chekhov’s families so stranded.

What explanations can be offered for the extraordinary strength of this connection? One must be a sociological one. Societies do, after all, only reproduce and sustain themselves through the production and formation of new generations, and the process of succession between one generation and other, and their inevitable difficulties and conflicts, are plainly a constant sphere of risk and crisis. New generations are formed by couplings of men and women, and much seems to hang on the qualities—of dominant love, trust, and cooperation or, alternatively, of hate, mistrust, and conflict—of such couplings. It is a striking fact that even where drama (as for most of its history) represents women as subordinate to men, often with little effective voice or agency, nevertheless the quality of relationships to them, external and internal, are represented in drama as crucial to well-being. The fact that women may have had to take second place in most areas of life does not alter the fact that it is disturbed or poisoned relationships with loved women that contribute to the destruction of Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth, with catastrophic consequences for the societies in which these men are powerful figures. It is as if the great dramatists have continued to remind the world that women are as significant as men to the survival and well-being of society, however much a dominant patriarchal order has preferred to pretend otherwise.

There are unconscious dimensions to these links between the world of intimate relationships, and the wider public sphere.