Hamlet and the oedipal complex

(approximately 1200 word essay)

The oedipal complex is a theory formed by Sigmund Freud, stating that individuals have a repressed desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex while feeling rivalry with the parent of the same sex. There is much evidence in the play that suggests Hamlet is a victim of the oedipal complex.

Hamlet is an emotionally complex character. In the beginning of the play, Hamlet is grieving over his father's death. Hamlet's mother has been remarried to Hamlet's uncle. After a visit from a ghost who tells Hamlet that his father has been murdered by his uncle, Hamlet becomes obsessed with avenging his father's death. Hamlet also is repulsed by his mother's marriage to his uncle. This act was considered immoral in Hamlet's time.

Furthermore, in the beginning of the play when Hamlet is reciting his first soliloquy, he makes many references to his disgust in his mother when she is with other men. "Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him, as if increase of appetite had grown." He says this of his deceased father. He does not want to remember how his mother hung on his father, as if to satisfy some great appetite, a need for his love. He tells that his mother married his uncle with "most wicked speed," to "incestuous sheets." He then continues, "It is not nor it cannot come to good; But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue."

Hamlet must keep quiet about his feelings and it tears him apart. Hamlet decides to fake madness to the king and queen in order to act out his revenge. Hamlet finds that what his mother has done is nearly an unforgivable sin. He is driven to proceed with his plan of murder because he sees it as the only way to lift the burden of his mother's sin and break up the incestuous marriage.

Hamlet has an Oedipus complex and there is much evidence for it. Throughout the play, there are several hints that the young prince suffers from the Oedipus complex. Claudius is quoted, "The queen his mother lives almost by his looks," (Hamlet IV.vi.11-12) revealing a sense of closeness between Hamlet and his mother. This also reveals the need for Hamlet in his mother's life. Although Hamlet does love his mother, he is able to fall in love with Ophelia. Quite possibly, Hamlet saw qualities in Ophelia that resembled those of his mother, which would explain the early attraction between the two. Other more striking evidence is visible when the ghost or old Hamlet commands young Hamlet to, "Let thy soul contrive against thy mother." (Hamlet I.v.85-86) In this scene the ghost is trying to make sure that Hamlet keeps his impulses controlled, and will carefully plan a course of action upon his mother.

The most important key to understanding Hamlet's true feelings is the "Closet Scene" or Act 3 Scene 4, in which the ghost reappears in order to prevent Hamlet from enacting his childhood fantasies with his mother Gertrude. Without this scene, it would seem unlikely that Shakespeare had any intentions of suggesting an Oedipal relationship between Hamlet and his mother. Young Hamlet finally decides to confront his mother, and is extremely upset by the situation. However, instead of talking about his mother's second marriage to his uncle, or her possible involvement in the killing of his father, Hamlet decides to focus on his mother's sexuality. Hamlet is obviously disgusted with his mother. He speaks very sexually in regards to her relationship with Claudius. The significance of this scene being set in the queen's bedroom is very important, as Hamlet makes many references to beds in the scene: "In the rank sweat of an ensnared bed" (Hamlet III.iv.93-96), meaning...