

# **Admission and Exclusion: the hidden rules.**

**Mary Farrell**

## **Abstract**

The rules of belonging to a group can be clear and transparent or hidden and opaque. This paper examines some of the problems that can be experienced by members and provisional members of NZAP and draws analogies with Shakespeare's Hamlet. Of particular interest are the play's themes of protocol, power, betrayal and hypocrisy and how they can affect large group interaction. The pain and shame of self-consciousness and of feeling excluded can result in continuing difficulties when we meet together in large groups.

## **The Power of Protocol**

Outsiders to a country, a family, a society, an association or any sort of group face initiation rites or ordeals of various kinds. The rules of a group are always both explicit and implicit. The word "protocol" has a particular meaning here in New Zealand, where Maori protocol has significance for all of us in this country and needs to be learned and understood if we are not already familiar with it. This protocol is open and available to those who wish to learn it. In Roman times, the protocollunt was the vital heading to the first page of a legal or binding document, and the word protocol literally means "a record or a register". Protocol has come to mean a kind of social code. Unless protocol is being deliberately used to exclude outsiders, we must assume it exists to allow significant behaviours and standards to be passed on so that they can continue to nurture and strengthen the community. In this case, protocol needs to be clear, open and available. Only then can we understand and use it – the better we understand it, the more gracefully can we use it.

My experience of being an outsider to NZAP was that the protocol of the association was apparently clear and available, but actually hidden and opaque. When I was about to go for my initial applicant interview back in 1997, friends who were members gave me all kinds of advice:

"Just mention transference and counter transference ten times, and you'll be OK"; "Don't show any vulnerability – they don't like that"; "Make sure you don't mention Rogers or counselling!"

In fact my experience of this initial interview was very affirming and clear – here were three colleagues who were genuinely interested in my work and my life as a newcomer to New Zealand. Although my eventual admission to full membership of NZAP in 2000 was also an enriching and confirming experience, my first oral assessment interview in 1999 was anything but affirming and clear – rather it was an experience of being lost in the marsh, a bit like Frodo stumbling about with Gollum hot on his heels, wanting to salvage something precious, but ending up confused, agonised and humiliated. I am glad that since then, much thought has been given to the clarity, honesty and transparency of the oral assessment process.

### **Self consciousness exposed**

Reflecting on these personal experiences has led me to question the hidden rules of belonging, and how much these affect us in whatever group we find ourselves. My first thought was that such experiences of misunderstanding or not knowing the rites of belonging evoke intense self-consciousness in most people. Phil Mollon, in his great study of narcissism, *The Fragile Self*, speaks of the phenomenology of self-consciousness, and writes of three varieties of self-consciousness:

1. Self-awareness, the ability to introspect and be conscious of one's self.
2. Embarrassed self-consciousness, a painful and shameful awareness of the self as the object of the other's unempathic attention.
3. A compulsive and hypochondriacal preoccupation with the self: a compelling need to look in mirrors and to evoke mirroring responses from others. (1993:54)

Mollon goes on to describe the “emergence of a self that observes the self” which seems to occur in the second half of the second year. It is during this time that the child begins to show concern over behaviour that violates adult standards. Similarly, Carl Rogers speaks of the “conditions of worth” (1961:167) which begin to infiltrate the organismic self, and distance the child from its own experience. When the child who is delighting in the experience of the muddy puddle is told sharply “What a mess you are!” the result is a sudden onset of the second state – embarrassed self-consciousness. The more repetitive such unempathic interventions are when the self is being observed, the more disturbed is the interaction between self and others.

The old fairytale of Snow White illustrates the third form of self-consciousness – the stepmother has to consult the mirror daily to be reassured that she is the most beautiful woman in the land. When, one day the mirror tells her she is no longer the most beautiful, she fragments into a psychotic and sado-masochistic state. The recent film of Snow White, directed by Michael Cohn, with Sigourney Weaver as the evil stepmother/mother/witch, shows this in the most emotional terms: the woman who looks in the mirror sees her own beautiful mother and confuses her reflection with her mother's, no longer sure what her appearance is. As Mollon says:

When there is an experience or fantasy of an unempathic other observing the self, the more total the identification with the observing other, the more intense the self-consciousness. The presence of the other may be felt to be overwhelming, pushing the subjective self to the margin. Self-consciousness then emerges as a response to a threat to the self.

(1993:55)

### **North by North West: Hamlet and hypocrisy<sup>1</sup>**

Further thinking led me to find analogies for the scapegoating, hypocrisy and projective identification which can occur between powerful groups and vulnerable individuals in Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Hamlet*. In a crisis of identity, bitterly betrayed by his mother, Hamlet is a young man just returned home after some years at University. Although not an outsider to the Court, Hamlet knows that while he has been away, the rules have changed. His father, the late King of Denmark, has died a month previously, and his mother, the Queen, has married his father's brother, Claudius – "before the funeral meats were cold". Understandably, Hamlet is in a state of grief and anger.

One of the overt rules of belonging to the Court of Denmark is that courtiers offer the King and Queen unquestioning admiration and loyalty. The new covert rule seems to be that grief should be put away with great speed, and the dead person should not be mentioned again. Hamlet is told in no uncertain terms that "all who live must die" and that it is commonplace to lose a father. After his initial superficial and unconvincing eulogy, Claudius is offended by any mention of his late brother.

*From Almereyda's film Hamlet: New York 2000*

This scene shows an audience of admirers gathering in a conference room at the "Denmark Corporation", where the new head of the corporation, Claudius,

---

<sup>1</sup> The original presentation of this paper included use of DVD clips from Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet*, 2000. I have provided a brief resumé of each clip I used to illustrate points in the paper.

is announcing his marriage to Gertrude, his dead brother's wife and Hamlet's mother. It is a scene of power and charisma – Claudius is handsome, polished, articulate and in control. All the people in the audience – except Hamlet – seem delighted to welcome their new ruler, and eager to forget the dead King, who has only been dead for a month. They also seem happy to accept that Claudius has quickly married his sister-in-law. After the ceremony, Hamlet walks with his mother and Claudius to their waiting car. His mother tells him: "Thou knowest 'tis common – all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity" (Act 1, sc. 2).

But Hamlet cannot forget, and early in the play, there is the famous scene during which Hamlet's father's ghost appears, and speaks to Hamlet of his "foul and most unnatural murder – murder most foul!" (Act 1, Sc.5). The story the ghost tells is that while sleeping in the orchard, Claudius, his own brother, now the Queen's new husband, poured poison into his ear. Poison is a theme and a symbol in Hamlet. Everyone is talking about everyone, accusing everyone – poisoning each other's ears with rumours. Behind every curtain, someone is spying and eavesdropping. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" is one of the many famous quotes that can be found in this play.

*From Almercyda's Hamlet: Thy Father's Spirit*

During this scene, the ghost of Hamlet's father tells his son the whole story of his ghastly murder. It is a horrifying description. When the ghost leaves Hamlet, he speaks of the hypocrisy inherent in the whole situation in powerful terms: "That one may smile, and smile and be a villain!" (Act 1, Sc.5)

It's not difficult to see Hamlet in terms of a dysfunctional family. Freud, Ernest Jones, and many other psychoanalytic writers have written about Hamlet as a classic example of the "Oedipus Complex". For Jones, Hamlet's successfully repressed jealousy of his father and attraction to his mother is reactivated by Gertrude's remarriage to Claudius. Repression of incestuous and parricidal drives must be carried out again: "These ancient desires are ringing in his mind, once more struggling to find conscious expression, and need such an expenditure of energy once again to repress them that he is reduced to a deplorable mental state." (Jones: 1949:19)

However it is also possible to see the court of Denmark as dysfunctional. Ruled by a powerful few, who not only decree the laws of the country but also behave like emotional secret police, the court is exclusive, rejecting of outsiders and intent on hiding its guilty secrets. Like all dysfunctional units, the court of Denmark attempts to protect its reputation by concealing the distress and trauma

experienced by its members, and by naming scapegoats, in this case Hamlet, who carries the insanity of the court by “feigning madness”.

One of the central questions of Hamlet concerns his madness – is it feigned or is it real? Does he assume madness as a protective device? As K.R. Eissler writes in *Discourses on Hamlet – A Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, “Madness has long been believed to be a sort of guarantee against an adversary’s evil intentions. A madman is not, after all, to be feared as one fears a cunning enemy.” (1971:438)

In order to preserve himself from being put on the King’s list of dangerous people who need to be removed, Hamlet assumes the cloak of madness. The cloak allows him to behave in ridiculous and delirious ways, and to assume his “antic disposition” while he works out how he can avenge the death of his father.

For the first three acts of the play, it seems that most of the characters, including Hamlet’s beloved Ophelia, believe that he is truly mad. Leading the pack in this regard is the King’s counsellor Polonius, Ophelia’s father. He follows Hamlet around, shaking his head over his decline and talking to him in a condescending and pseudo-parental way, tutting and intruding, eavesdropping, and at one point, setting up his daughter to trap Hamlet into an admission of madness.

*From Almereyda’s Hamlet: Scheming Players*

In this scene, Cordelia is “wired” by her father and the King and Queen, and sent to Hamlet to find out about his state of mind and to declare any relationship between them over. They want evidence of his “madness”. Hamlet is moved by Ophelia at first but then suddenly realises the conversation between them is being taped and overheard by others who wish to judge and condemn him. (Act 3, Sc. 1)

Surrounded by unempathic others – even the ghost of his father is singularly uninterested in his well being and asks him not a single question – Hamlet is lost in a hall of mirrors, none of which reflect him accurately. Slowly but surely, the cloak of madness begins to become a nightmarish skin. He devises a plot to force Claudius to admit the murder. In Almereyda’s version of the play, Hamlet makes a film about a murder that closely resembles the murder of his father by Claudius – in the original play, it is a piece of mime, performed by travelling players and called “The Mousetrap”. It is at this point that Claudius, in soliloquy, unaware of any listener, finally admits the dreadful crime of which he is guilty, and the hypocrisy of the court is shown in full.

The atmosphere of distrust and paranoia, of spying and judging, of eavesdropping and reporting back to the powers that be have their eventual tragic end. Polonius

is accidentally killed whilst hidden in a cupboard spying on Hamlet and his mother. Ophelia has suffered hugely from all the coercion and craziness around her and becomes psychiatrically ill. She drowns herself. In the final scene, Hamlet's traitorous mother drinks the poisoned glass of wine that Claudius had set out for his nephew. Throughout the play, Hamlet has dreamed of murdering his father's usurper. This murder is eventually accomplished, but shortly afterwards Hamlet dies too, the victim of a poisoned sword wound.

*From Almareyda's Hamlet: Duel to the Death*

The terrible last scene shows the death of Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude and finally Claudius. The decadent state has to be abolished so that new blood, in the form of Fortinbras of Norway, can begin to lay down the foundations of a healthier regime. (Act 5, Sc.2)

### **Shame, denial and the large group**

Perhaps the main message of Shakespeare's universally acclaimed play is that hypocrisy can only result in disaster. As Eissler put it so succinctly:

Wherever human beings meet, whether it is as family, Parliament, professional organizations, church, there is hypocrisy. The first solution that comes to mind is honesty. If it is indeed true that at the bottom of hypocrisy is the denial of the Oedipal crime, then members of the older generation should frankly admit to the younger that they themselves were guilty of it. The necessity on the part of the older generation to keep a secret from the young is the true crux of the metabolism of generations.

(1971:376)

If we extrapolate from this that hypocrisy is about concealing guilty secrets and projecting our shame onto others, we can perhaps understand how difficult it can be for us to be in a large group together. We know that shame has the potential to paralyse a group. Acts of shame remain opaque and unable to be spoken about directly, as illustrated in *Hamlet*. Members of the group feel unsafe and experience the sensation of something horrible, like a ghost in the centre of the room which has to be avoided. Silences are experienced as persecutory.

Nowhere in our association was this "horrible centre" more evident than in the former oral assessment procedure, spoken about in hushed and horrified whispers, giving rise to rumour and terrified fascination in prospective members. Before the welcome recent revisions of our assessment procedures, if a candidate was deferred,

communication with panel members was unequivocally forbidden. In my own case, even the tape of my first oral assessment was completely inaudible.

As Terry Birchmore writes in his online paper "Shame and Group Psychotherapy",

Not knowing information that we assume others in the group share disconnects us from group membership. It is a symbol of our inadequacy, our unworthiness to be included and to participate. Lack of connection with others is the most shameful of experiences and has the potential to stir up Oedipal fears of exclusion and anxieties about our personal worthiness to be accepted and related to as an equal in the group. (<http://www.birchmore.org/index.html>)

How can we, as members of our association, avoid pushing each other into these wells of unmanageable feelings? Can we maintain our standards and at the same time remain open and honest about our failings and vulnerability? Can we let our rules, protocols and initiation rites become transparent and open to discussion? Can we continue to foster self-awareness and protect others and ourselves from the pain and shame of embarrassed self-consciousness? These seem to be the questions that face us as we move forwards. By our constant efforts to reach each other, by making our dealings with each other and the codes we hold significant as transparent and honest as we can, perhaps we can continue to develop our association into one whose cornerstones are founded on reciprocal empathy and compassion.

### **References:**

- Birchmore, Terry (1998) *Shame and Group Psychotherapy*. <http://birchmore.org/index.html>
- Eissler K.R.(1971) *Discourses on Hamlet*. New York: International University Press
- Jones, Ernest (1949) *Hamlet and Oedipus*. New York: Gollancz
- Mollon, Phil (1993) *The Fragile Self*. London: Whurr
- Rogers, Carl (1961) *On Becoming a Person*. London: Constable
- Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet* Film (2000) directed by Michael Almereyda