Thought Experiment

Kelly Lagor

SHAKESPEARE, FREUD, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS IN *FORBIDDEN PLANET*

The fiery outline of a great beast becomes visible as bolts from the disintegrator beams converge upon it. It towers vaguely and monstrously upward, now hugely bellowing as though bewildered. It advances, bent slightly forward against the beams.

Meanwhile, in his lab, Morbius sleeps uneasily in the seat of the library projector. Altaira's voice comes to him from without. "Father! Where are you?"

As Morbius begins to waken heavily, the gauges behind him gradually fall back to zero. Back at the ship, the beast vanishes.

Morbius finds Altaira standing in the living room in her night-dress. She bursts into relieved sobs as he embraces her. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"I just had a terrible dream. There was blood and fire and thunder and something awful was moving in the middle of it. I could hear it roar and bellow."

"Now, now, you know a dream can't hurt you."

"Not me, not us. The thing I saw was trying to break into camp, it was going to kill . . . you'll take care of him for me, won't you father? You'll protect him?"

"My darling, I'm completely helpless as long as he remains here so willfully."

Scene from *Forbidden Planet* (1956)

Forbidden Planet was MGM Studio's only entry in the science fiction B-movie boom of the 1950s. The script caught the imagination of the film's entire crew, who at the time worked at the most glamorous studio in Hollywood, and the resulting film became much more than a standard creature feature. Instead they made a Freudian adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), set on an alien planet. Despite critical acclaim, the film flopped, in large part because the audience for this movie didn't exist yet. It would, however, become a harbinger of science fiction spectaculars to come, and to this day it remains a truly remarkable film.

But how did a Shakespearean science fiction story about the Freudian unconscious get made?

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"Not I, but the poets discovered the unconscious."

Sigmund Freud, 1926

That part of our motivation is due to things we're not fully conscious of is something most people today take as a given. But the unconscious wasn't really a concept until the sixteenth century, and the ramifications of the unconscious didn't become a part of philosophy, then science, until the nineteenth century. Prior to having a concept for the unconscious, unexpected behavior was often attributed to the influence of sorcery, or the actions of gods and demons. These kinds of motivations can be seen in our earliest literature, such as in the eighth century BCE poet

Homer's invocations of the goddess of delusion, Aite, whom his characters shifted blame for their deeds onto; or in the interplay of fate, blindness, and irony in *Oedipus Rex* (429 BCE) by the Ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles.

The unconscious was first described during the Renaissance by the Swiss physician Paracelsus. In a 1567 work, he explained that St. Vitus' Dance, the phenomenon of spontaneous, contagious dancing, was not caused by possession, but was instead due to "mere opinion and idea, assumed by imagination, affecting those who believe in such a thing . . . [their] sight and hearing are so strong that unconsciously they have fantasies about what they have seen or heard." The ever rational-minded Paracelsus also suggested mental well-being could affect physical health, that germs caused infection, and that chemical medicines could be used as cures. His therapies quickly became more popular than those based on Galen's four humors, a theory from ancient Greece, which had dominated medicine for over a thousand years.

The Renaissance was already in decline in Europe when Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, but its late arrival in England meant he experienced its British heyday. He saw the decline of the Roman Catholic Church's influence coincide with a greater focus on humanistic values. Ancient Greek and Roman literature abounded, as did a spirit of open-mindedness and curiosity, and an interest in rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. While it's impossible to say exactly where Shakespeare encountered such ideas—be it through conversation, in books, or osmosed from the culture around him (we simply don't know enough directly about his life to say), they are strikingly evident in his plays, and he would, in fact, be the first to bring them to the stage.

The Renaissance can be seen in Shakespeare's spirit of linguistic invention (he coined over 1,700 new words that are still in use today), which ran counter to the more simplistic writing style that dominated his day. He eschewed the Aristotelean unities of time and space that previously limited plays to one conflict in one place on one day. He mixed the tragic and comic genres instead of keeping them discrete. Shakespeare also wrote characters with complex psychology and human fallibility across social strata, from low-brow peasants to high-brow monarchs. He was also the first writer to include unconscious motives in many of his characters, particularly notable in Hamlet's repeated inability to kill his uncle in *Hamlet* (1602), and in Lady's Macbeth's somnambular compulsion to confess and wash the blood from her hands in *Macbeth* (1606).

No writer in human history compares to Shakespeare, whose surviving plays have been in more-or-less continuous production on stages worldwide for four centuries.

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"And your father's name will shine again like a beacon in the galaxy. It's true, it will remind us that we are, after all, not God."

Commander John J. Adams in *Forbidden Planet*

The Tempest was the final of Shakespeare's solo-written plays, and was one of the last plays he worked on before his death in 1616 at age fifty-two. It's a tragicomedy, as was characteristic of his later plays, and is both an exploration of dualities and a meta-study of theater itself. Due to its uniquely adaptable setting and themes, it has remained a popular play since its first performance in 1611.

The play is set twelve years after the rightful Duke of Milan, Prospero, and his now fifteen-year-old daughter, Miranda, were exiled to a remote island. Prospero's preoccupation with alchemy lost him the favor of his people, enabling his brother, Antonio, to succeed in a coup against him, abetted by the King of Naples, Alonso. At the play's start, a ship carrying Antonio; Antonio's son, Ferdinand; his brother Sebastian; as well as Alonso and his staff, is caught in a magical storm off the coast of Prospero's island by the spirit Ariel, who is bound to Prospero. Following

the "shipwreck," the players are split into three groups. The first is Ferdinand alone, who Prospero puts in a position to court and eventually wed Miranda. The second is comprised of Antonio, Sebastian, Alonso and his councilor Gonzalo. Prospero succeeds, through Ariel's power, in tempting Antonio and Sebastian to hatch a plot to assassinate Alonso. The final pair is made up of Alonso's jester, Trinculo, and his alcoholic butler, Stephano, whom Prospero causes to encounter Caliban, the island's only native inhabitant, who is also enslaved to Prospero. Together they hatch another assassination plot, this time against Prospero, meant to win Caliban's freedom. The plot lines eventually converge upon Prospero, the eye of the storm, who, instead of revenging himself upon all those who betrayed him, forgives them. Now that Miranda's future is secured in her marriage to Ferdinand, Prospero gives up his magic, and they depart the island, leaving Caliban and Ariel to their freedom.

The various parallel and dualistic elements—the master/slave dynamics of both Caliban and Ariel, the parallel assassination schemes in the alternating comic Caliban and tragic Antonio subplots, the parallel elements of control and chaos in Prospero's schemes—all give the play a deeply surreal feel. The duality even extends to the characterization in how love/hate and loyalty/rebellion are depicted in each character. Its setting is also deeply ambiguous, a blank canvas on which different characters can reveal themselves. For example, the island is a prison to Prospero and Ariel, and an Edenic home to Caliban and Miranda. This allows the play to be eminently adaptable and interpretable, encompassing themes like colonization, exploitation, and justice and power. Finally, the magic of the setting and events of the play are only enhanced by its constant pushing of the fourth wall. Prospero's magic is frequently compared to theatrical illusions, its setting to a stage, its characters to actors—and we, the audience, are implored to use our applause to set Prospero free at the play's end.

Gradually, in the centuries to come, readers of the play began to assume Shakespeare, middle-aged at the time and about to semi-retire, wrote himself into Prospero, citing the ceding of his stage magic, and how his "every third thought" would be about death. The plea at the end was also seen as Shakespeare asking permission from the audience to retire. This made *The Tempest* a popular citation in various "Author Question" conspiracy theories, born from the utterly blank canvas of Shakespeare's life and our insatiable interest in him, which hold that William Shakespeare, a rural-born man for whom the only direct evidence of his life is a small number of documents about mostly petty financial squabbles, couldn't possibly have written the plays of Shakespeare. Only someone with more learning, culture, and experience could write such rich texts. Many famous figures have been taken in by these theories, including the modern father of the unconscious, Sigmund Freud.

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> ". . . Whereof what's past is prologue, what's to come
> In yours and my discharge!"
>
> Antonio in *The Tempest*

The unconscious continued to evolve as a concept in the centuries between Shakespeare and Freud. Before the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, one of the popular treatments for what we now recognize as mental illness was exorcism, and by the end of the eighteenth century, there was no greater exorcist in Europe than the German priest, Johann Joseph Gassner.

Gassner began casting devils out in his local parish in the 1760s after he cured himself of fits associated with his religious activity using exorcism and prayer. He was so successful he became famous, and in 1774, took the show on the road. While those who embraced the rationalism of the burgeoning Enlightenment remarked on the sharp increase in possessions that preceded his announced arrival in any village,

others, including the Prince Bishop of Regensburg, embraced him.

The spirit of Enlightenment rationality sought to dispel the kind of mysticism Gassner's approach embodied, and in 1775, Franz Anton Mesmer, another German physician, arrived in Munich at the behest of the Enlightenment-embracing Court, to prove Gassner's success had nothing to do with evil spirits. Mesmer's theory of "animal magnetism" held that blockages in the flow of an invisible magnetic fluid in the body caused diseases. His method, which resembled Gassner's minus the Catholicism, involved magnets and Mesmer's intense focus, which lulled subjects into a trance state in which Mesmer induced a convulsive or delusional "crisis" to restore proper flow. Both methods proved effective, so the court sided with Mesmer.

Mesmer soon captured the public imagination, and generations of magnetism-enthusiasts followed. Mesmer, however, became overly focused on the nature of the magnetic fluid, as well as on his own special magnetic nature, and was thus never able to achieve the recognition he craved from the scientific societies. As magnetism evolved, Mesmer, his magnets, and his fluid were abandoned by his disciples in favor of an emphasis on the unique state of rapport the method evoked.

For the next century, this sleepwalking-like state of "hypnosis" became the chief method used to gain access to the unconscious. In the 1880s, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, after an illustrious career as the "founder of modern neurology," began his influential work on hysteria. He used hypnosis to interrogate the phenomenon. Charcot disagreed with the dominant theory that hysteria, a state of emotional excess, arose from frustrated sexual desire. He believed it was, instead, the result of trauma. His findings, however, were later discredited due to poor experimental design and the rampant influence of suggestion by him and his staff on his patients. But the impression Charcot made on Freud in 1886 had a more profound impact on the study of hysteria than Charcot's own work ever could.

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> "We are such stuff
> as dreams are made of, and our little life
> is rounded with a sleep."
>
> Prospero in *The Tempest*

Freud's impact on psychiatry cannot be overstated. Before Freud's talking therapy, the more scientific treatments for mental illness included things like massage, hydrotherapy, trepanning, and bloodletting. The understanding that a large portion of mental life takes place outside of our awareness, and that dysfunction comes from our repression of that mental life, revolutionized mental health treatment.

Freud's family moved to Vienna from what's now the Czech Republic in 1859, when Freud was three. As a child, he was fascinated by all aspects of human culture, but dedicated himself to medicine after reading the romantic yet scientific aphorisms on *Nature* (1786) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe when he was seventeen. Goethe and his fellow Romantic writer Friedrich Schiller were leading figures in the German literary synthesis of Classical, Romantic, and Enlightenment thinking. Both men's work, along with Arthur Schopenhauer's idea of a universal will directing the activities of mankind, and Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that dammed up psychic energy drove human behavior, heavily influenced Freud's thinking.

The great turning point in Freud's life would be a three-month fellowship with Charcot in 1886. In Paris, Freud observed the use of hypnosis on patients, and upon returning to Vienna, he ceased his anatomical studies of the nervous system and set up a practice in nervous diseases. Around this time, he also learned of "Anna O.," a patient of his friend and colleague, Josef Breuer. Breuer found whenever he asked Anna O. to talk about her nervous symptoms under hypnosis, she recalled traumatic incidents, which eased her symptoms.

Freud and Breuer published *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, a founding text in psychoanalysis. Studies posited that hysterics suffer from "pathological reminiscing" after a traumatic incident that doesn't fade from memory as normal memories do. Attempts to repress these memories only preserve them and allow them to develop complex associations, but talking about these memories dissipates them. Freud gradually dropped hypnotism and increasingly urged his patients to free associate to reveal mental blockages. He also analyzed their dreams for symbols that might give clues to the nature of their repressions.

In 1896, after struggling with the death of his father, he undertook an intensive analysis of his own dreams and memories. In his letters from this period to his friend and colleague, Wilhelm Fliess, Shakespeare featured prominently. Freud had been reading and quoting Shakespeare since he was eight, and in his letters, he used the plays to contextualize his thinking. In one instance, he identified with Hamlet's deep love for his mother and resentment of his father, and saw this "Oedipal Complex," a nod to Sophocles' incestuous play, as a universal human phenomenon. "I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intention," Freud wrote in 1897, "but believe, rather, that a real event stimulated the poet to his representation, in that his unconscious understood the unconscious of his hero. How does Hamlet the hysteric justify his words, 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all'? . . . His conscience is his unconscious sense of guilt."

Considering how large a space Shakespeare occupied in Freud's mind, it's unsurprising he was swept up by the author question after Freud published the anonymized findings of his self-analysis in his landmark *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Freud saw dreams as wish fulfillment fantasies brimming with symbols of repression, giving his disciples a framework with which to unravel the unconscious minds of their patients. Freud would go on to develop his theory of the unconscious to include a more dynamic system of crosstalk between the unconscious yen of the id, the semiconscious controlling of the superego, and their influence on the fully conscious ego. He would also elaborate the sex and death instinctual drives—the forces behind attachment and anti-social behaviors, respectively.

By the 1930s, Freud achieved worldwide fame. In 1938 Freud, who was Jewish and whose work was burned by the Nazis, fled to London. Weakened by a long struggle with jaw cancer (caused by a lifelong cigar habit), the Great Register of the Royal Society was carried to him to sign, an honor only before extended to royalty. Freud died in England in 1939.

Psychoanalysts who were driven from Europe by the steady march of fascism reestablished their practices in England and the United States, where they went on to write the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as a guide for diagnosing mental disorders, and talk therapy soon became the primary treatment for mental illness. This made therapy accessible to all, not just the mentally ill, and freed many patients from asylums. Thus, the post-war period in the United States became a boom time for psychiatry, and by the 1960s, Freud's theories were a cornerstone of both psychiatric and liberal educations.

Freud's theories are rightfully compared to Darwin's in their impact on human history: both fundamentally changed the way we look at ourselves. Freudian concepts provided a superior framework through which to view all kinds of human behavior, which allowed Freudian explanations to become so endemic that even laymen now know what an Oedipal Complex is.

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"How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't."

Miranda in *The Tempest*

While Freud brought the unconscious to the mainstream, science fiction had been incorporating ideas about the unconscious since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, and the influence of magnetists, hypnosis, and multiple personality disorders could be found in some of its earliest works. In 1845 Edgar Allen Poe published his short story, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," in which a man is suspended in his moment of death by a magnetist. In 1886, as Freud undertook his self-analysis, Robert Louis Stevenson published his mad science/split personality novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.* While H.G. Wells' writing may be better associated with social Darwinism, the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's ideas about the unconscious will of man can be seen in the disastrous consequences of repressing the instincts of his hybrids in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and in the gradual unraveling of civilized behavior in his novella, *The Croquet Player* (1936).

Lecturer Gavin Miller, in *Science Fiction and Psychology* (2020), explores how Freudian concepts form the basis of the dystopian systems of control in *1984* (1949), by George Orwell, and *Brave New World* (1932), by Aldous Huxley. In *1984* Miller elucidates, Oceania controls its population by tightly restricting the sex instinct. "When you make love you're using up energy"; Winston explains to his illicit lover Julia, "and afterwards you feel happy and don't give a damn for anything. They can't bear for you to feel like that. They want you to be bursting with energy all the time. All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour."

In *Brave New World,* on the other hand, control is exerted by indulging the sex instinct. In conjunction with hypnosis, human engineering, and the complete erasure of families (and its Freudian consequences), an entirely sedate population is achieved. As the controller of the World State, Mustapha Mond, explains to Bernard, "Our Freud, [was] the first to reveal the appalling dangers of family life. The world was full of fathers—was therefore full of misery; full of mothers—therefore of every kind of perversion from sadism to chastity; full of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts—full of madness and suicide."

The 1950s also saw a spate of psychoanalysis-inspired fiction. Alfred Bester's explorations of society as a thin veneer over more destructive instincts could be seen in both his short story, "Oddy and Id" (1950), and in the Hugo Award winning *The Demolished Man* (1953), which involves a literal Freudian deconstruction of its protagonist/antagonist Ben Reich. John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956) takes place after the viral destruction of all grass crops and showcases the regression of humanity to a more primitive psychological state in the absence of civilization. In John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), every woman of childbearing ability in Midwich wakes up after the town is mysteriously put to sleep to find herself pregnant, and Freudian discussions of various hysterical symptoms ensues.

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> "Ethically, as well as technologically, [the Krell] were a million years ahead of humankind. For in unlocking the mysteries of nature, they had conquered even their baser selves."
>
> Dr. Edward Morbius in
> *Forbidden Planet*

Forbidden Planet was therefore very much a product of its cultural time. The original script, called "Fatal Planet," was written by Allen Adler, a stage producer, and Irving Block, a special effects wizard. They intended to pitch it to Allied Artists, a studio known for its low budget movies. Set on Mercury in 1976, the plot was standard "go to planet, kill monster, save girl," fare, but at the urging of their agent, they pitched it to MGM instead, and Block won over the producer with his energy and pantomiming of the invisible monster.

MGM wasn't in the B-movie game. It was a prestige studio known for its lavish epics like *Julius Caesar* (1953), and musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). But MGM studio head Isadore Schary saw something in the script, and brought on novelist and screenwriter Cyril Hume to rework it. Hume, a Yale-educated novelist, had been working for MGM as a screenwriter since 1930, notably bringing an upscale seriousness to MGM's Tarzan films, and while Hollywood already had a king of Freudianism in Alfred Hitchcock, Hume was the first to apply it to a science fiction plot. He also included science fiction literary genre nods, like Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics in explaining Robby's programming, and shades of Lovecraft in the enormous subterranean cities of the mysterious Krell and their library of forbidden knowledge.

Hume also added the Shakespearean homage. Dr. Morbius, played by Academy Award winner Walter Pidgeon, was modeled on Prospero. Prospero's dual natures are personified in Robby (the obedient Ariel), and his Id monster (the willful Caliban), and both are created by the same technology that destroyed the Krell. Morbius' daughter, Altaira, played by Anne Francis, is both innocent and sexual, a mix that confounds and attracts Commander Adams, played by Leslie Nielsen. This is bad news for the crew, as anything that threatens Morbius's contentment becomes the victim of his Id. First the crew of the original expedition, then Adams and his crew because they refuse to leave Morbius and, by extension, Altaira in peace. In the end, Morbius, like Prospero, cedes his Krell magic to save his daughter by destroying himself and the planet.

The art department at MGM leapt at the opportunity *Forbidden Planet* presented. They built massive sets and intricate props, which led to a doubling of the film's million-dollar budget. Robby and his sled alone cost nearly two hundred thousand dollars to design and build. Schary even agreed to shoot in the more expensive Technicolor and CinemaScope. The result was the first science fiction spectacular, the first movie set entirely in space, and even included the first entirely electronic score by avant-garde musicians Bebe and Louis Barron, composed a year before synthesizers were invented.

When the film was released in 1956, reviewers loved the blend of high and low brow elements. Alan Brien at the London *Evening Standard* thought Hume's script had "produced the most rumbustiously enjoyable of all Hollywood planetary melodramas . . . by dressing *The Tempest* in space suits." Despite the raves, it fell flat in theaters, barely making back a tenth of its budget. It also led to the ouster of Schary, in large part due to a marketing campaign that couldn't figure out who the movie was for.

Still, it remains a landmark film, not only in how it inspired Gene Rodenberry's *Star Trek,* but also serving as a template for the science fiction blockbusters to come.