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Goddess of Death: The pleasure principle at work in Shakespeare’s texts

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In the essay “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” Freud discusses man’s altering of a representation of death into one of love. This course of action is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s claim in *Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense*, where he claims that man invents truth to suit himself. Freud psychoanalyzes that man is altering reality out of a fear of his own mortality, while Nietzsche makes a similar claim by saying man does it out of a desire to live peacefully with others in a manner which preserves life.

Freud begins his essay with Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, in which three suitors are offered a choice between three caskets, and the man who chooses correctly wins the hand of Portia in marriage. The three caskets are made, respectively, out of gold, silver, and lead, (this becomes important later on when Freud relates lead to three other female characters). From this first venture into literary analysis, Freud cements his point by showing the origination of the three choice plot device in other stories. He makes the point that since the origination was in an astral myth, one should not automatically conclude that it was really true. He suggests that perhaps myths “were projected on to the heavens after having arisen quite otherwise under purely human conditions” (488-89). Freud here makes the claim that man made up myths then declared them as originating from the heavens. In *Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense*, Nietzsche makes a similar claim when he says that man “[builds] with the much more delicate material of ideas, which he must first manufacture within himself” (637). In both of these sentences, man is the origination of his own ideals. The most interesting subject for Nietzsche and Freud becomes, then, the study of man in his “purely human conditions,” as the originator of
myths (for Freud) and metaphors (for Nietzsche). In order to study his subject in this manner, Freud inverts the caskets from *Merchant of Venice* into symbols for three different women. Through this substitution the subject matter of the play becomes one from real life—“a man’s choice between three women” (489). By this inversion, Freud can now study the matter of choice on a human level rather than at a mythic astral level.

In order to study man’s process of choosing in greater depth, Freud gives more examples from literature of the three choice syndrome, wherein the third (youngest) is the right choice: Cordelia, Cinderella, Psyche, and Aphrodite. Freud then manages to find some proof that Cordelia, Cinderella, and Aphrodite can be thought of as representative of the lead casket from *Merchant of Venice*. Cordelia is symbolically lead because she “masks her true self, becomes as unassuming as lead, she remains silent”, Cinderella because she “hides herself, so that she is not be found”, and Aphrodite because she “ne dit rien”1 (489-90). In the case of all three, silence—a leaden dumbness—is the unifying principle. In a psychoanalytical approach to the appearance of silence in dreams, Freud comes to the conclusion that dumbness represents death. For Freud then, the third choice (third female), comes to be either a dead woman or the Goddess of Death (491).

In the second section of the essay Freud goes on to show how man alters the true perception of the third female as the Goddess of Death out of a fear of his own mortality and out of a desire to satisfy his pleasure principle. First Freud admits the contradiction of how each woman he has chosen to represent the third choice are actually (in the stories) women of love, beauty, wisdom, and loyalty. His reply to this contradiction is expressed by his claim that man, realizing he was subject to death, rebelled and constructed myths by which the “Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love. . .The third of the sisters is no longer Death, she is
the fairest, best, most desirable and the most lovable among women” (492). Although each of
the third sisters are truly images of Atropos, (the third fate and Goddess of Death), man changes
their nature to satisfy himself. This urge to alter reality comes out of man’s unwillingness to be
subjugated by fate into choosing death, his ultimate destiny in any case. In the reinvention the
best choice of the three must be the one who can bring man the most pleasure, therefore she
cannot be the Goddess of Death, which no man chooses for himself Freud says, but rather can
only be the Goddess of Love. 2 The Goddess of Love can fulfill any wish and satisfy man’s
pleasure principle to the maximum. Once man has created the Goddess of Love in the place
formerly occupied by the Goddess of Death, he chooses to ignore his own manipulations of
reality in favor of satisfying his own pleasures. The method of (re)inventing an idea and then
attempting to forget that one has done so is once again reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Truth and
Falsity, in which man can only live with “some repose, safety, and consequence” if he forgets
himself as the “artistically creating subject” of his world (637). For Nietzsche, as for Freud,
man is a forgetful creator who invents truths in order to appease himself and his own fears of
reality.

At the end of his essay on “The Theme of the Three Caskets” Freud comes to the role of
the poet in writing about the three choices plot device. In his analysis, Freud states that the poet
is attempting to reverse the reinvention of myth and to show the third choice as she truly is—as
the Goddess of Death (the example he uses in particular is Cordelia from Shakespeare’s King
Lear). And that even after all man’s choices, that were not really free choices, the one that will
“take him into her arms” is “the silent goddess of Death” (494). This conclusion reiterates
Freud’s point that the women are “silent” like lead, like the casket from the original example, as

1 Translation: “said nothing”
well as being the death goddess of mythology. It also proves that man’s attempts to maximize his pleasure principle, while at the same time hiding his fears, works only in appearance; as the truth remains that what he fears (death) is his inescapable destiny. Therefore, although man tries to subvert the Goddess of Death by replacing her with the Goddess of Love, he cannot escape the “human conditions” which Freud has all along been endeavoring to clarify.


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2 A replacement that is historically viable in that many myths contain females who are both at once the divine preserver of life and the destroyer of it (492).