

## LACAN'S HAMLET

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By way of opening, a stupid question asks itself here: Why is Hamlet a tragedy, and such a tragedy, at that? Is it absolutely necessary for so many deaths? Is it not enough that the audience loses the hero and he the possibility of a romantic sojourn with the fair Ophelia. Must the mortifying bullet of destiny ricochet with such insistence to annihilate a whole court? What begins with the murder of King Hamlet, follows with the death of the perpetrator, Claudius, Queen Gertrude, Prince Hamlet, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, the ill-fated Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And, as if that is not enough to give a hint that death is in the air, somehow, Yorick's skull makes its way into the proceedings.

In pursuit of a better question, the following discussion touches on issues arising from the reading of an excerpt of Lacan's seminar *Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet*,<sup>1</sup> where he demonstrates how Hamlet is captivated by his mother's desire. "The vacillations with regard to the father and Hamlet's object, Ophelia, can be traced to the question of the desire of the Other and the persistence of a phallic identification."

### **The Object**

Lacan's seminar opens with talk of Ophelia, in her status as object of Hamlet's desire. He refers to her as 'that piece of bait named Ophelia'. Once again, one may ask, 'Why?' What are his terms of reference? The etymological roots of the name, Ophelia, invoke the notions of profit, advantage, gain, while on the other side of the balance sheet she resonates the not unrelated notions of debt and bondage.<sup>2</sup> But the events in the play demonstrate the object as not particularly effective in its seduction of the subject. It is exposed as a ruse through which the subject comes to play out his or her destiny. The object, then, operates as a mirage; a splendid edifice that marks the location of an axis; one that appears to command the orbit of the subject's desire. Like the tail of a comet, this desire is the *après-coup* of the trail left by the process effected by the phallus. The object has to do quite a lot of manoeuvring in order to maintain the semblance that it leads the chase, and indeed as Ophelia is dropped by Hamlet, she falls from the scene.

Lacan reminds us that "Our purpose...is to show the tragedy of desire as it appears in *Hamlet*, human desire, that is, such as we are concerned with in psychoanalysis". He goes on: "We distort this desire and confuse it with other terms if we fail to locate it in reference to a set of co-ordinates that, at Freud showed, establish the subject in a certain position of dependence upon the signifier".

It is to the phallic function that one must look for the organising principle of the dynamic of the subject's desire. The subject is presumed to first conceive of itself in terms of an identification with the phallus as an imaginary object, as it is designated by 'that which the mother desires'.

Again, why? One speculates that the phallic object is a signifying object in as much as it can be read by the subject for much-needed data and instructions as well as being an enigma to ponder. This is a preoccupation that will distract him from the anguish of dislocation given to sentient being. It can give starting co-ordinates of location, for example, the focal point of her gaze, the place to which her call is directed; that compelling call from the place of the Other that the subject will find impossible to ignore. It will also provide for the subject some ideas about how to invent himself; what form to take in his incarnation. Through the process afforded by the paternal metaphor the subject will move from being the phallus for another to a dimension in which he will seek it in another, a partner. Freud did not give an optimistic prognosis. Lacan stresses,

"the extent to which the play is dominated by the desire of the Mother as Other, i.e. the primordial subject of the demand. The Omnipotence of which we are always speaking in psychoanalysis is first of all the omnipotence of the subject as subject of the first demand and this omnipotence must be related back to the Mother."

With reference to Gertrude, Lacan says,

"For this woman — who doesn't seem to us so very different from other women, and who shows considerable human feelings — there must be something very strong that attaches her to her partner. And doesn't it seem that this is the point around which Hamlet's action turns and lingers."

This underlines that, with respect to the question of the desire of the Other, the subject's parents are, for the most part, mere stooges for the forces which play them in the 'other scene' of psychic structure. Lacan points out too, "What gives the phallus its particular value?...Freud tells us that it is a narcissistic demand made by the subject".

### ***The Problem of Time***

In this reading, Lacan takes up a particular aspect of the Other, that is, the 'hour of the Other'. Much of the detail of what he has to say is organised around the vexed question of time. What Lacan teases out is the way in which time is organised in the life of this subject, Hamlet. Clearly, there is something problematic that persists in the determination of the interplay of Hamlet's action/inaction.

"Hamlet accepts everything. Let's not forget that at the beginning, in the state of disgust he was already in (even before his meeting with the ghost) because of his mother's marriage... When he stays on it is the hour of his parents. When he suspends his crime it is the hour of the others. When he leaves for England it is the hour of his stepfather. It's the hour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he sends them on ahead to death...the hour of Ophelia, the hour of her suicide... Whatever Hamlet may do, he will only do it at the hour of the Other."

A benchmark against which the transgressions around time can be measured in the play is the crowing of the cock at dawn. The cock gives the location of the phallus in its proper place; calling all to order. This call is one to which even the surreal ghost submits, as he retreats from his encroachment upon the world of the living in line with its command. This is a phallic function in its symbolic facet as mediator between the real, the irrupting forces of the night, and the imaginary, given by social world of day. Without the signifier in its place, there is no order and everyone is implicated in the retribution for its transgression. In this play, "the phallus appears, disappears, is there, is not there, is there too much. In the human world it is there either too much or too little..."

The temporal terms of reference of the play span thirty years. At the beginning of the play, we are told that the Old King Hamlet took lands from Fortinbras of Norway. Towards the end of the play, we are informed that this took place on the very day of Hamlet's birth. The day of Hamlet's death, we are told through the words of the grave-diggers, is also the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. On this day, by the nomination of the dying Hamlet, these lands return to the young Fortinbras, 'the restorer of order', as Lacan puts it, together with the Kingship of Denmark. The term for the assumption to the throne in the play is 'election', a term which refers to a spoken nomination by the current sovereign of his successor. Hamlet has been bypassed by the usurping Claudius. His moment is stolen, his time distorted. Here we have recourse to a quotation from Claudius, who says to Laertes, Hamlet's double, 'Time be thine, Laertes'. Hamlet takes up both his sovereignty and the mantle of his manhood at the hour of his castration, here truncated to the hour of his death.

Following the wedding of his mother and Claudius, Hamlet speaks of the two events, the death of his father and the untimely marriage of his mother, as having taken place both 'less than two months' and 'one month' apart. He later refers to the death of his father as two hours ago. Ophelia corrects him saying that four months have elapsed. It is possible to deduce from this that approximately two months have passed since the injunction from his father to act out the revenge.

With the clock stuck or, at least scuppered, the play becomes an examination of process. It is a close study of the determining elements which converge upon the act. It demonstrates the way in which the signifier triggers the set of dominoes which culminate in the scourge that befalls Denmark, thus restoring to another Kingdom that which was plundered from it thirty years before. Or to put it another way, it is possible to observe the phallic function as the logical copula of process.

Consider that Hamlet's own object, Ophelia, dies before his mother's object, Claudius. Claudius dies after Gertrude is herself dead, when her desire for him is also dead; and when Hamlet knows that his own death is immanent. These conditions of process circumscribe and construct the platform of Hamlet's capacity to act.

Lacan stresses too another form of temporal disturbance, the issue of insufficient mourning in the play; where the rites due to the dead are cut short: "Insufficient mourning is what makes the marriage of Hamlet's mother so scandalous." Lacan also delineates that, "[...] the Oedipus complex goes into decline in so far as the subject must mourn the phallus [...]. The phallus is not just one more object to be mourned like all the others. Here, as everywhere else, it has a place of its own, a place apart [...]". He continues to

surprise us with, "What is impossible to bear in experience is not one's own death, which no one has, but the death of another... What is involved in mourning is a hole in the real, that impeaches the whole of the symbolic order".

It is possible to infer from Lacan's take on the play that the entirety of the play itself is a moment of real time. It is possible to observe an episode of chronological time bent out of shape in the service of process.

### ***Assumption of manhood***

For the duration of the play Hamlet vacillates between 'bestial oblivion or thinking too precisely on th'event'.<sup>3</sup> The phallus holds the subject in suspension. Hamlet's phallic identification ensures that for as long as he subscribes to it, he is the puppet of the desire of the Other. In this case, that 'Other' inhabits many smaller others: his mother, Claudius, Laertes, his father even. For Hamlet to act on the behest of his father would simply to be, yet again, the puppet of the will of another, even if that other is the exalted father. Another way to read the play is that it poses the question of manhood, and the trajectory of the play follows the process of the assumption by the boy of that manhood. Of this assumption, Lacan tells us elsewhere that

"What we are dealing with is an antinomy internal to the assumption by man [*Mensch*] of his sex: why must he take up its attributes only by means of a threat, or even in the guise of a privation."<sup>4</sup>

The phallus brings consistency, the semblance of order, 'homogenisation of the crowd by means of identification'. On a good day, it is what would enable Hamlet to take the bait that is Ophelia. But the play begins on a bad day, when something of the order of the real has been disturbed. As Lacan puts it, the symbolic rites due to the dead have not been observed and what is abolished from the symbolic reappears in the real. Hence, in the play, consistency is effected as the solidification into the daylight world of everyday reality. There are references to the question of what 'seems'. Hamlet conspires to reveal, to unmask the phallus, which is so ensconced in the domestic fabric that it is obscured under that veneer of good manners. Meanwhile, the consistency of the faithful Ophelia as a benign object is obliterated by the shadow of the 'breeder of sinners' (III,i) that she would be reduced to if married into domestic submission.

The phallus has the attribute of elusiveness, "the body is bound up in this matter of the phallus...but the phallus on the contrary is bound to nothing: it slips through your fingers...it is always veiled and appears in a flash and then it is gone". The phallus creates a disorientation in the visual field. The imaginary effect of being surrounded by mirage; a series of reflections which act as decoys to the real object of pursuit. The effect of which is the displacement of the act into a plethora of bungled actions, all of which are mortal: Hamlet kills Polonius; he drives Ophelia to suicide; he is unable to prevent the death of his mother, who swallows a poison meant for him; he kills Laertes, and, he himself is dealt a deadly blow. All without manifest intention; he commits actions that are unjust, that are blunders.

Lacan says of Hamlet that he "incarnates the mortal phallus". To take this further, it is only when he knows himself to be dying — 'with not thirty minutes left' (V,ii) — that he is able to act with intention and precision, with justice: he kills Claudius, he acts to prevent further disorder by nominating Fortinbras as the King of Denmark and he charges Horatio to tell the story of what took place.

Lacan diagnoses the denigration of Claudius by Hamlet as a denegation.

"We surely cannot fail to relate this to the fact that, in the tragedy of Hamlet, unlike that of Oedipus, after the murder of the father, the phallus is still there. It's there indeed, and it is precisely Claudius who is called upon to embody it. Claudius' real phallus is always somewhere in the picture. What does Hamlet have to reproach his mother for, after all, if not for having filled herself with it...The phallus to be struck at is real indeed. And Hamlet always stops. The very source of what makes Hamlet's arm waver at every moment, is the narcissistic connection...that Freud tells us about in his text on the decline of the Oedipus complex: one cannot strike at the phallus, because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a *ghost*."

On the vexed question of manhood, Shakespeare has recourse to the matrix provided by Christianity, constituted by the positions of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost and the Serpent. This affords the possible choreographies open to the subjects as they play out their moves. But Shakespeare's art is subject to its own conditions. A tragic hero, to be defined as such, according to Greek tragedy, must bear

the markings of both nobility and of *Ate*, 'the delusion that affords ruin'.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the moves of the players are constrained, dictated even, by the pagan operator of the trickster. The leap to associate this notion with the phallus is no great feat.

With these operators at its disposal, the play elaborates the possibilities of manhood with various partial examples of its form: Is it the King as warrior, as ruler — feared and revered? Or Yorick, the jester, who bore Hamlet on his shoulders; Or Laertes, who acts out his passion grieving and avenging the death of his sister; Or Polonius who early on in the play gives his son, Laertes, instructions on how to behave like a man? Such a scene is thus marked as absent from the discourse exchanged between Hamlet and his father.

Certainly it seems that here fatherhood confers the rights of manhood, including the rights of nomination and blessing. Claudius attempts to procure the assent of Hamlet to accept him as Father. Hamlet refuses. The father, for Hamlet, is exalted and awesome. King Hamlet was a warrior, one who killed and plundered while his wife gave birth to his son.

Hamlet is designated as the Son. He remains as Prince when his birthright suggests that he should be King. Lacan notes that it is the dependence of his desire on the "Other subject...that touches the 'nerve and sinew' of Hamlet's will". He struggles to break free of the shadow cast by his father. When Horatio says 'He was a goodly King', Hamlet answers 'He was a man' (I, ii). But the shadow of doubt looms over this assertion. The King did not engage his wife in the domain of her desire, instead he stole lands from his neighbour.

But that cannot be all of it. Perhaps Claudius holds something of the secret, he who is the seducing serpent; the unholy ghost who feeds the desire of a woman, who was 'seeming virtuous' when she was the wife of King Hamlet. But Claudius, as the Phallus, is circumscribed by the moves open to the serpent — he poisons the King through his ear, with venom, killing with poison and not with the blade, which is the mark of a man.

Perhaps, the answer converges upon the act, that which Hamlet is only able to accomplish in the last few moments of his life.

Lacan's formulation posits that castration cannot be reduced merely to the fear of losing one's penis. The phallic attribution is the conception of something that should have been there and is experienced as missing. Castration, for Lacan, is the symbolic operation that cuts the imaginary bond between the mother and child, and that grants the boy or girl the ability to symbolise that loss through words. His treatment of the play demonstrates that the failure of castration places the subject, Hamlet, at the beck and call of the Other. The consequence of this failure, Hamlet uses the phallic attribution to languish in his own *jouissance* of the intrigue that is in the process of unfolding. He will have his pound of flesh. He, too, usurps. For it is not he who has been wronged, it is his father. As his son, he could avenge him but does not. Although he is designated as the son, he is not able to act from that place. Since he remains caught up in an imaginary capture, he takes on Claudius not as the hand of his father but as a contender for the phallus, with righteousness as merely alibi. He demands that the phallus be unmasked. In this way he exposes the desire of his mother and his own *jouissance* is exposed in decrying it.

1. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from J. Lacan, *Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet*, French text edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, from the transcripts of Lacan's *Seminar VI: Desire and its Interpretation* (1958-9); trans. J. Hulbert, excerpts published in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, Johns Hopkins UP, 1982, ed. Shoshana Felman.
2. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Abridged Edition (OUP, 1998).
3. J. Lacan, *The Meaning of the Phallus* in *Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne: Feminine Sexuality*, trans. J. Rose, ed. J. Mitchell and J. Rose, MacMillan, 1982.
4. W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* in *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare: Volume III — Tragedies*, ed. S. Wells and G. Taylor, OUP, 1987.
5. Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, 1998.