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'To be, or not to be, that is the question,' intones William Shakespeare's Hamlet, immortally:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to (Shakespeare 2003: 3.1.56–63).

Arguably the greatest philosopher of the last century, Martin Heidegger, made his name by claiming that we have forgotten the proper, abyssal meaning of 'Being' in the modern age. It is telling that, for all of Heidegger's staggering erudition and his later worship of the poets, to my knowledge, he never refers to Shakespeare, arguably, the poet of poets. Nor does the philosopher refer to Shakespeare's Hamlet (1603; here 2003), written at the very inception of the modern age and arguably the bard's greatest creation. For Hamlet is a poetic masterpiece in which the Seinsfrage (question of the meaning of Being) is explicitly raised by Shakespeare's most famous hero—indeed, it fairly torments the troubled prince of Denmark from the play's first moments. Arguably the greatest psychoanalytic thinker of the last century, Jacques Lacan, was by contrast in little doubt about the importance of Hamlet as a poetic masterpiece, or about the centrality of the Seinsfrage to its eponymous hero:
For Hamlet, [what is central] is that he is guilty of being. He cannot tolerate being. Before the drama of *Hamlet* even begins, Hamlet is aware of the crime of existing [. . .] for him the problem of existing [. . .] is posed in terms which are his own: namely the 'to be or not to be' which is something which engages him irredeemably in being as he very clearly articulates it (Lacan 1958–59a: Session 13, p. 212).

Lacan devoted the best parts of eight sessions of 'The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VI. Desire and its Interpretation, 1958–59' (1958–59a) to Shakespeare's masterpiece. Hamlet's eloquent laments on the 'mortal coil' 'are not meant to leave us unmoved', he wryly comments, punctuating the famous soliloquy from the beginning of the third act (ibid.: Session 13, p. 213). Indeed, Lacan notes, there is something singularly striking—'stupefying'—about Shakespeare's most uncanny tragedy: '[I]t is something that knocks you over backwards, makes you bite the carpet and roll on the ground, it is something unimaginable' (ibid.: Session 14, pp. 221–2). It is then fair to say with Jean-Michel Rabaté that when Lacan turns to *Hamlet* in his sixth seminar, it is less to illustrate preformed dogma, than to be struck by what it can teach psychoanalysis about human desire. 'I maintain [. . .] and I think I am in accord with [Sigmund] Freud in saying this,' he comments in concluding his first session on the play, 'poetic creations engender rather than reflect psychological creations' (ibid.: Session 13, p. 214).

Lacan's sessions on *Hamlet* from 3 March to 13 May 1959 certainly come at a culminating point in a sequence of four stunning seminars, in which Lacan had established his status as a strikingly independent, if abidingly faithful, reader of Freud. *Le Séminaire. Livre IV. La relation d'objet, 1956–57* (The Object Relations, 1994) and 'The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book V. The Formations of the Unconscious, 1957–58' (1957–58) had seen Lacan's systematic refiguring of Freud's fundamental notions of the Oedipus and castration complexes. In the process, as we shall see, Lacan had formulated many of his key distinctions: the imaginary versus real and symbolic fathers; the phallus as the signifier of the desire of the mother; and desire versus demand and need. 'Desire and its Interpretation' also contains some of Lacan's earliest formative thoughts on the role of fantasy anticipating his later, central concept of the *objet petit a*,
cause of desire. *Hamlet* confronts Lacan at this decisively important, generative juncture in his development, as 'this kind of network, of birdcatcher's net in which the desire of man is essentially articulated' (1958–59a: Session 14, p. 222).

Lacan's reading of *Hamlet* begins by addressing, with Freud, the problem that everyone faces, and that Hamlet poses to himself, amid fiery self-recriminations, namely, that he is in no doubt that he ought to kill the usurper Claudius and avenge his murdered father. Yet, though heaven itself might enjoin him, not to mention all-too-human motives of rivalry, vengeance and the word of his revered father, Hamlet cannot bring himself to act (ibid.: Session 13, p. 210). He has 'cause, and will, and strength and means to do't', 'yet I live to say this thing's to do' (Shakespeare 2003: 4.4.45–6, 44).

There are libraries of critical essays written on this topic. *Hamlet* is one of the most written-about works of literature in Western history.¹ Lacan’s response and his interpretation of the play take bearing, here as elsewhere, from that of Freud. For all the oceans of ink that have been spilt on *Hamlet*, Lacan notes, it is striking that no one before Freud, circa 1897, had remarked the kinship between *Hamlet* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Freud wrote of *Hamlet* in three places: in his letters to Wilhelm Fliess (1887–1904; here 1985), in the later paper ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917; here 1963) and centrally in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899; here 1953). Freud’s observations were then importantly developed by Ernest Jones’ 1910 piece ‘The Oedipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet’s Mystery’. Let us cite Freud’s paradigmatic formulations from

¹ Nearly every possible motive or angle has been explored, down to Edward P. Vining’s bold speculation in *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1881), that the key is that Hamlet was secretly a woman dressed as a man, whose real aim throughout the play was to seduce Horatio! (see Lacan 1958–59a: Session 14, pp. 217–18). Hamlet is the archetypal modern whose crippling self-doubts reflect the fast-emerging doubts of an age that would live without God or religion. Or Hamlet is the man of knowledge, educated at Wittenberg, no less, where [Martin] Luther studied. But he knows too much. He is the one who has peered into the Dionysian abyss at the heart of Being, and so he is paralyzed: 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought' (Shakespeare 2003: 3.1.85). For other critics, the mystery of *Hamlet* is that there is no mystery. However celestial the bard’s famed wit, it was not up to giving sufficient reason for the actions and inaction of his listless hero. And there are other readings, or rationalizations, for Hamlet’s failure to live up to his name (see Lacan 1958–59a: Session 14, pp. 215–21).
The Interpretation of Dreams at some length, since they will frame all that follows, even as we will see Lacan moving beyond Freud's position:

Another of the great creations of tragic poetry, [. . .] Shakespeare's Hamlet, has its roots in the same soil as Oedipus Rex [. . .]. Strangely enough, the overwhelming effect produced by the modern tragedy has turned out to be compatible with the fact that people have remained completely in the dark as to the hero's character. The play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations and an immense variety of attempts at interpreting them have failed to produce a result. [. . .] The answer, once again, is that it is the peculiar nature of the task. Hamlet is able to do anything—except to take vengeance upon the man who did away with his father and took the father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish. Here I have translated what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet's mind (Freud 1953: 264; quoted in Lacan 1958–59a: Session 13, pp. 204–5).

There is something remarkably 'balanced' about Freud's reflections on Hamlet 'in this half-page in which one could say that when all is said and done everything is already there', Lacan contends (ibid.: Session 14, p. 216). Freud's observations neatly put in their place those readings that see Hamlet as incapable of action, and which thereby fail to notice that when it comes to Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he acts as promptly and ruthlessly as any Machiavellian prince. More deeply, Freud's interpretation situates the play at what Lacan proposes is exactly the right level: namely, as what he terms a 'tragedy of desire' (ibid.: Session 17, p. 264; Session 19, p. 295): 'of desire in so far as man is not simply possessed, invested, by it but that he has to situate, has to find this desire' (ibid.: Session 14, p. 223).

Before Freud, Lacan goes so far as to venture that 'Hamlet remained a complete literary enigma' (ibid.: Session 13, p. 207). What Freud showed us is
that—as we might reprise Friedrich Nietzsche and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—at the very least, if Hamlet is so disoriented for having stared into the abyss of Being, it is also because the abyss stared back at him with an uncannily familiar, if not familial, gaze. If Freud is right, that is, the truth of the play is revealed in the seemingly contingent fact that when Hamlet does come to his appointed hour, it is while acting as the champion, in a duel, of the very man who is his true enemy. It is along the axis of the rivalrous identification of Hamlet with Claudius that we can understand why Hamlet could not raise his hand against the usurper, until he himself had been fatally wounded, in the process littering the stage with corpses. To strike at Claudius would be, for Freud, to have struck a blow at the man who had fulfilled in reality what Hamlet had only dreamt of.

Nevertheless, Lacan's perspective on Hamlet typically moves beyond that of his master, Freud's, even as it takes its initial bearings from it. Indeed, the two thinkers' responses to the play could almost provide a 'royal road' into understanding the reorientation of psychoanalysis introduced by Lacan's reframing of the Freudian field. In an addendum to the interpretation of Hamlet cited above, Freud suggested that the differences between the Hamlet story and the Oedipus myth—the fact that, in the former, the parricidal-incestuous crime is performed not by the hero, but by an other, and it is known to Hamlet, and before him to this other, from the beginning—reflect the higher levels of repression characterizing modern civilization, and its malaises.² Lacan’s reading of the play, with qualifications, suggests an almost opposed orientation that, in fact, approaches more closely Freud's passing designation of Hamlet as a melancholic in 'Mourning and Melancholia'. Hamlet 'opens up a new dimension on man' in this work, Lacan claims (ibid.: Session 15, p. 237). And this dimension is predicated on a certain failure of the symbolic order in the play's early modern conception and setting, rather than its more thoroughgoing historical instauration. If our modern Oedipus feigns madness, we might say, there is neurosis, if not madness, in his feigning:

² Noting, of course, that Claudius' crime is fratricidal, although Lacan suggests that Hamlet Senior was as a father figure to him, both as older sibling and as king.
What Hamlet finds himself confronted with in this 'to be or not to be' is the encountering of the place taken by what his father has said to him. And what his father has said to him qua ghost, is that he had been surprised by death 'in the blossoms of my sin' [Shakespeare 2003: 1.5.76]. It is a matter of encountering the place taken by the sin of the other, the unpaid sin. The one who knows is on the contrary, the contrary of Oedipus, someone who has not paid for this crime of existing (Lacan 1958–59a: Session 13, p. 213).

Lacan's reading then sets itself, as the red thread into the mystery of the play, a question asked less often in *Hamlet* reception: what are 'the paths by which [Hamlet] can rejoin [the act to which he is called], which will make possible the act which in itself is impossible'? (ibid.) Lacan wants to answer why Hamlet does finally act, as well as why he for so long does not. And it is in this light that his reading, at its heart, pays close attention to a figure and a relationship which is absent from Freud's interpretation: 'namely Hamlet's relations to [. . .] the conscious object of his desire', Ophelia (ibid.: Session 13, p. 211). It is not for nothing that Ophelia's very name evokes *ho phallos* in the Greek, Lacan boldly claims, thereby invoking the very signifier of life or Being at the hidden heart of the ancient mysteries, which he was at this point in his career elevating to the central stake or foil in the Oedipal complex. If Hamlet's 'time is out of joint' (Shakespeare 2003: 1.5.189), Lacan argues, it is above all because this phallus is not in its rightful place for him. And if Being presents itself in such gruesome aspects to him in his strangely methodical madness, it is because this phallus has not been properly mourned or symbolized, so that it can only return in the real as a dangerous Thing—or, as Lacan interprets one of Hamlet's 'schizophrenic' remarks, shortly after he has killed Polonius who was lurking behind the curtains in Gertrude's chamber:

> The body is with the King [the phallus],
> But the King [the phallus] is not with the body (ibid.: Session 14, p. 230).

In order to begin to fathom Lacan's reading of *Hamlet*, then, and how he conceives the *Seinsfrage* within it, we need to start with the 'piece of bait' called Ophelia whom Hamlet treats so symptomatically.
"To be": From Ophelia to Gertrude

Regarding Hamlet's relations to his conscious object of desire, Lacan comments, Shakespeare begrudges us little. Ophelia is 'one of the most fascinating creations which have been proposed to human imagination' (ibid.: Session 13, p. 211). Hamlet is clear that he 'did love [her] once' (Shakespeare 2003: 3.1.114). Ophelia's testimony to her brother Laertes and to her absurd father Polonius attests as much, alongside her maidenly affections for the prince. The letter from Hamlet which Ophelia dutifully delivers up to Polonius, and he deceptively to the king, poetically confirms it: 'doubt truth to be a liar,' the prince enjoins his sweetheart, 'but never doubt I love' (ibid.: 1.2.117–18).

Finally, in the famous graveyard scene in the last act to whose decisive importance for Lacan we will return in the final section below, Hamlet weighs his devotion for the dead woman 40,000 times greater than Laertes' brotherly affection (ibid.: 5.1.236)—exactly twice the number of Fortinbras' contingent against Poland whose valour rebukes Hamlet's inaction in the central scene of the fourth act (ibid.: 4.4.56–61).

It is what transpires between these two seasons of Hamlet's evanescent affections for Ophelia that concerns Lacan. The precipitating moment is Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost. When next he comes to his beloved, everything has changed. In Ophelia's affecting words, here is what transpired:

My Lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyvèd to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors—he comes before me.

(ibid.: 2.1.75–82). [. . .]

He took me by the wrist, and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such perusal of my face
As a would draw it. Long stayed he so;
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
And with his head over his shoulder turned
He seemed to find his way without his eyes,
(ibid.: 2.1.85–96).

It is not too much to say that something 'properly pathological' transpires for Hamlet at this instant, Lacan comments (1958–59a: Session 17, p. 277). What follows is a complete transformation in his relations to Ophelia. 'I did love you once,' he tells her when they next meet, and then corrects himself: 'I loved you not' (Shakespeare 2003: 3.1.114, 116). Indeed, everything he has to say to Ophelia or about her from this point onwards until her death is characterized not simply by a 'disgust at sexuality', as Freud put it, but is moved by what Lacan calls more specifically a 'horror of femininity':

Namely, what he uncovers [...] before the very eyes of Ophelia as being all the possibilities of degradation, of variation, of corruption, which are linked to the evolution of a woman's very life in so far as she allows herself to be drawn into all the actions which little by little make a mother of her. It is in the name of this that Hamlet rejects Ophelia in the fashion which appears in the play extremely sarcastic and extremely cruel (1958–59a: Session 13, p. 211).

Conception is a blessing, the prince advises Polonius, 'but as your daughter may conceive—Friend, look to't' (Shakespeare 2003: 2.2.183). To Ophelia, in whose madness Hamlet's outrage will indeed find its destination as he desires (ibid.: 3.1.88–9), there is a famous counsel: 'If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go. Farewell' (ibid.: 3.1.131–3):
I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no mo marriages. Those that are married already, all but one shall live, the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go (ibid.: 3.1.137–43).

If *Hamlet* as a whole is the drama of the eponymous hero's failing desire, of there being something wrong with his desire, as Lacan gently puts it (1958–59a: Session 13, pp. 210–11), Lacan's contention is that Ophelia becomes the symptom of this repudiation of desire:

[T]he object in question [Ophelia] is no longer treated as she should be, as a woman. She becomes for him the bearer of children and of every sin, the one who is designated to engender sinners, [...] woman conceived here uniquely as the bearer of this vital tumescence which it is a question of cursing and putting an end to. A nunnery could just as well at the time designate a brothel. Semantic usage shows it (ibid.: Session 17, p. 278).

It is in this light that Lacan makes one of his maverick linguistic interpretations. With the help of Boissade's *Dictionnaire Étymologique Grec*, he notes that in Homer, we can find the signifier *Ophelio*, which has the sense of 'to make pregnant, to impregnate', and also 'this molting, vital fermentation, which is described more or less as allowing something to change, or to thicken' (ibid.: Session 16, 262). Boissade goes further and ties *Ophelio* to the nominative form *ho phallos*, and thereby to the Thing (*la Chose*) which Lacan had spent much of the previous two years elevating to the heart of the psychoanalytic lexicon: 'it is thus moreover that Hamlet qualifies it, situates it, in order to reject it: you will be the mother of sinners, this image precisely of vital fecundity, this image [...] illustrates for us more I think than any other creation the equation [...] *Girl=Phallus*’ (ibid.: Session 16, p. 262).

In order to understand Lacan's conception of the significance of Ophelia in Hamlet's tragedy, we need to turn for a moment to his burgeoning conception of the phallus, which dates from exactly this period of his teaching. To
cite the key passage in 'The Signification of the Phallus' (1966; here 2006b), Lacan's famous contention concerning the phallus in psychoanalysis is:

In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a fantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it such an object (part-, internal-, good, bad, etc.) in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality pertaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes. [. . .] the phallus is a signifier (2006b: 579).

Yet, Lacan illustrates in several sessions of 'The Formations of the Unconscious', that this revelation is primarily neither his, nor psychoanalysis. He continues in 'The Signification', written at the same time as 'The Formations of the Unconscious': 'it is not for nothing that Freud used the reference to the simulacrum that it represented for the ancients' (ibid.). The fact that 'our very ancient' cultures, for example, made so much of elevated standing stones shows 'the world of difference there is between this relationship of a certain animal species more or less upright in stature to what is hanging from the bottom of his belly', than that of our Darwinian forbears (Lacan 1957–58: Session 27, p. 447). In pagan cultures, the phallus was the central object in fertility cults from the beginning and thus something highly symbolic: 'In short, what is striking is [sic.] the very special function of this object which, for the ancients, beyond any doubt, played the role in the mysteries, of the object [. . .] [to which] initiation lifted the last veils, namely of an object which for the revelation of meaning, was considered as a final significant character' (ibid.: Session 20, p. 332).3

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3 The murals on the walls of the Villa of Mysteries at Pompeii to which Lacan refers in the session of 23 April 1958 (ibid.: Session 20, p. 333) show the price the initiate paid for the unveiling of the phallus in the mystery fertility cults (ibid.: Session 21, p. 350): 'everything which refers to the phallus is the object of amputations, of marks of castration, or of more and more accentuated prohibitions, [up to] the eunuch character of the priests of the great goddess' (ibid.: Session 20, p. 333). Do these ritual instances not show us, Lacan asks, that from the beginning, the phallus—far from being only the tumescent male organ—represents [. . .] desire in its most manifest form [. . .] namely that which makes the human being who does not have [it] be considered as castrated, and inversely which for the one who has something which can claim to resemble it, as menaced by castration' (ibid.: Session 20, pp. 332–3)?
But what did this phallus signify for the ancients, according to Lacan, which meant that its approach—except in such stylized simulacra as those worn by the ancient comic actors (ibid.: Session 20, pp. 331-2)—ineluctably provoked the winged demons graphically depicted at Pompeii? Since man is a being caught up in ‘this logos business’, Lacan contends, he unfailingly perceives himself as excluded from the totality of desires [. . .] as a link in the chain of life, as only being one of those through whom life passes’ (ibid.: Session 26, p. 427). Nevertheless, this same being-in-language means that humans can envisage this chain of life from which we have been constitutively cut as a single vital whole:

[L]ife as such [. . .] not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, a natural being—[. . .] Nature incarnate or sublimed [. . .] the natural realm understood as utterly subordinated to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce (Mulhall 2008: 18).

The meaning of Being, we might say in Heidegger’s language, is first of all, for Lacan, associated with the primordial plenitude that the subject fantasizes is lost to it, the object of both its most intimate desires and the symbolic prohibitions undergirding primary repression. And it is exactly this primordially lost register of Being or being alive that Lacan designates as the ‘signification of the phallus’ as a signifier in the article bearing the same name:

The phallus is the privileged signifier of this mark in which the role of the Logos is wedded to the advent of desire. One could say that this signifier is chosen as the most salient of what can be grasped in the sexual intercourse as real as well as the most symbolic [. . .] sense [. . .] since it is the equivalent in intercourse to the (logical) copula. One could also say that by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the most vital flow as it is transmitted in generation (2006b: 581).

Lacan’s typically maverick wager in this period of his teaching, that is, was to resituate this ancient signification of the phallus in the psychoanalytic orbit, or—beyond Freud and Jones—to see in the Freudian field an experiential ground for what the pagans figured in the mythological other scene. The way he does this involves a wholesale refiguring of what Freud had aimed to
describe in the Oedipus complex and its dissolution, where, the little boy finds himself in an ambivalent position of rivalry towards the father, in competition for possession of the mother. This is how Freud asks us to imagine Hamlet and to see the reason for his inability to strike down Claudius, his rival/alter ego. The stake or pivot that will allow the boy out of this complex is his ownership of what Little Hans eloquently dubbed a 'widdler'. When he sees that mother, or perhaps a sister or little girlfriend, lacks this privileged endowment, he comes in fear and trembling to conceive that he might lose it too.

So we note two things. First, the mother figures in the Freudian understanding of the Oedipus complex principally as the object of the child's and the father's, competing desires. Freud is also almost silent on what we might call the 'father-mother axis' of the Oedipal triangle. The father claims her as his. And, aided by the child's castration fears, that ought to be enough to impress upon the child the prohibition against incest that will from here on form the nucleus of the boy's superego. Second, Freud's emphasis on the penis leads him into notorious difficulties when it comes to accounting for the sexual development of little girls: 'what women want'.

The Oedipus complex plays itself out differently for Lacan. The founding reason is that desire, for him, is always the desire of the Other. From the mirror stage onwards, he claims, the child shapes its sense of identity round the images of its significant others. In this imaginary register, desire is always tinged with aggression and identification, with deep ambivalence: as Freud had grasped in his formulation of the oral, anal-sadistic and Oedipal-phallic stages. The reason is that the child necessarily comes to desire what others desire, since its observations of what they want configure its wishes in the first place. This affects Lacan's re-conception of the Oedipus complex in two ways, which correspond to the two points noted above about Freud's understanding. First, the pivotal stake in the child's desire is not simply possession of the mother qua object. The child desires above all the mother's desire as a subject, wants to be desired by her and ultimately, to be 'everything' for her—the phallic Thing which might fully satisfy her. With all these anthropological resonances in mind, Lacan proposes that the 'phallus' is the signifier of this desire of the mother. As such, this is what both the boy and the girl child most ardently
desire to be in the phallic or Oedipal stage: 'In the first moment and at the first stage [of the Oedipus complex], this is what happens: it is in a way in a mirror that the subject identifies himself with what is the object of desire of the mother' (Lacan 1957-58: Session 10, p. 169).

So, for Lacan, as the phallus replaces the penis as the key stake in the Oedipal drama, castration fear becomes primarily the fear of losing the mother's desire, rather than any biological endowment. His emphasis on the intersubjective constitution of desire has, however, a second consequence for the Oedipus complex. Since it is the mother's desire, rather than her being, that is 'the Thing', correlative to a weight falls on the father-mother axis of the Oedipal triangle that is absent in Freud. Castration will primarily involve an intervention of the father in what Lacan calls the discourse of the mother. Simply put, how the mother responds to the father, particularly to his words, becomes the decisive given for Lacan in the resolution of the Oedipus complex. For example, when Little Hans' father talks to his mother, Lacan notes, he may as well be whistling—and this is central to why Hans developed his phobia. If the child is to assume an identification which will, given time, allow it to peaceably negotiate sexual difference, Lacan claims that the father needs to intervene—not as the more potent rival—in the symbolic register in the name of a Law which will mediate and limit the desire of the mother, as it is perceived by the child. He must present himself to the child as someone who, as the bearer of the Law against incest, has the phallus—and for that reason—is not the phallus. In what Lacan calls the paternal metaphor, this Law must take the place of the signification of the phallus—as we have said above, the primordial meaning of Being for the subject, which the symbolic order primordially debars.

The differing direction that Lacan's reading takes from Freud's—to which Hamlet's relations to Ophelia indeed provide the outer key—can now be approached more directly. The emphasis in Hamlet, for Lacan, falls primarily on the Hamlet-Gertrude axis of the Oedipal triangle, rather than on what directly concerns Hamlet's relations to Claudius. More specifically, it is only in so far as Hamlet cannot see what Claudius might be for his mother that he fails to stand up to this incestuous imposter, instead inflicting his rage on everything and
everyone else, including his most vicious treatment of Ophelia. It is to the question of Gertrude’s desire and what it signifies for Hamlet, that we turn now.

**GERTRUDE’S DESIRE, OR THE MEANING OF BEING (S[Ø])**

So, as Lacan puts it paradigmatically, if he is right: ‘[U]ndoubtedly the least that can be said to count for [Hamlet] is that he is fixed on his mother—it is the most certain and obvious thing in Hamlet’s role’ (1958–59a: Session 15, p. 241); ‘[W]hat Hamlet is grappling with, is a desire which should be regarded, considered where it is in the play, namely [. . .] very far from his own, that it is not the desire for the mother, but the desire of the mother’ (ibid.: Session 15, p. 243). That this is a step beyond Freud is not something Lacan advertises, as Rabaté comments. Nevertheless, in the same seminar, Lacan makes it very clear, even gently disputing Freud’s reading of the play en passant: ‘I mean one might just as well say, that if Hamlet immediately hurled himself on his stepfather, that he would find here after all the opportunity [to salve] his own guilt by finding outside of himself the really guilty party’ (ibid.: Session 15, p. 241).

It seems astonishing that no one before Lacan had stressed the importance of this desire of the mother, Gertrude, in putting Hamlet’s time and desire out of joint. From the very beginning, before he has heard anything of his father’s ghost, Hamlet speaks very frankly concerning the matter. If the whole business of life appears ‘sterile, stale, flat and unprofitable’ to him, he is not silent as to why it strikes him thus:

That it should come to this!
But two months dead—nay not so much, not two—
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly—heaven and earth,
Must I remember? [. . .] and yet within a month—
Let me not think on’t; frailty, thy name is woman—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body,
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules—within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
She married. Oh most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets.
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue

Shortly afterwards, when his father's ghost appears to Hamlet it is not simply to fire his anger against Claudius. Hamlet is also charged, in very direct terms, by his father's perturbed spirit to end Gertrude's 'luxury' with Claudius, who is designated here as 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast' (ibid.: 1.5.41 and 81–91). Although Lacan does not remark on it, it is remarkable that Hamlet's harsh repudiation of Ophelia decisively situates her not simply qua mother —already a surely deeply telling fact in the maiden who had previously attracted his amorous desire. Ophelia is calumnied by him as in effect nothing short of the very representative of maternity per se, that she might give birth to such sinners as he: 'Get thee to a nunnery—why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me. [. . .] What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?' (ibid.: 3.1.119–25). We see here the positioning of Ophelia as mother, if not as Gertrude herself, in order then to deride her as proxy for the sins of the other.

At the heart of Lacan's interpretation, however, lies his reading of the astonishing, infamous exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude in the central scene of the third act, wherein Hamlet comes to his mother's chambers, after the conceit of the Schauerspiel or play within the play. Lacan notes that having abjured her, again in the most explicit term, to desist from sleeping with his
uncle, Hamlet hesitates or, at the very least, waxes ambivalent. 'What shall I do?’, Gertrude asks Hamlet, her heart ‘cleft in twain’ (ibid.: 3.4.182; 157). Lacan replies by observing that, at this decisive moment when Hamlet directly confronts the question of his mother’s desire, he can only fail:

[H]aving got to this summit that is in question, there is in Hamlet a sudden collapse which makes him say: and then after all, now that I have told all that to you, do whatever you want, and go and tell all this to Uncle Claudius. Namely you are going to let him give you a little kiss on the cheek, tickle your neck a little, scratch your tummy a little, and the pair of you are going to end up in bed as usual [. . .] we see here [. . .] the disappearance, the dying away of his appeal, into something which is a consenting to the desire of his mother, laying down his arms before something which seems ineluctable to him: namely that the mother’s desire here takes on again the value of something which in no case, and by no method, can be raised up (1958-59a: Session 15, p. 244).

The different elements of the Lacanian reading of Hamlet as then turning on Hamlet’s inability to symbolize Gertrude’s desire unfold themselves with astonishing explanatory power. After Hamlet’s passion towards Gertrude has provoked her to ask him ‘What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?’ (Shakespeare 2003: 3.4.21), Lacan notes that Hamlet’s father’s ghost asks him to mediate, or render straight again, the errant desire of his widow. In Shakespeare’s verse, the ghost asks Hamlet to use all his considerable wit to ‘step between her and her fighting soul. Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works’ (ibid.: 112-13). Again, when Ophelia compliments the acuity of Hamlet’s interpretation of the ‘mousetrap’ play he stages to catch the king’s conscience, Lacan notes that his response almost literally anticipates his father’s demand to rectify Gertrude’s desire, and ruefully reflects his inability to do it. 'I could interpret between you and your love,’ Hamlet says to the shunned Ophelia, ‘if I could see the puppets dallying’ (ibid.: 3.2. 255).

Yet, this is the problem and source of the great mystery of Hamlet’s inability to act as he ought, Lacan contends. He cannot step between his mother’s desire and her fighting soul, since he cannot see the puppets of her desire.
dallying. Nor can he comprehend what might be pulling the strings of this libidinous woman who could fail to mourn a husband and to take his brother and rival so soon to bed. In Lacan's defense, a great deal of what Hamlet says—together with his scurrilous persecution of Ophelia as proxy for the sins of his mother—makes the importance of this troubling enigma of Gertrude's desire clear. The central exchange with Gertrude, already raised, highlights his disbelieving bewilderment at his mother's ability to love Claudius. The mirror that he holds up to her fighting soul juxtaposes the counterfeit images of the queen's two lovers. Claudius for Hamlet is less than a shadow of his father, scarcely 'a King of shreds and patches' (ibid.: 3.4.102), and he cannot pour enough derision upon his head. So what can Gertrude possibly see in him?

Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes?

(ibid.: 3.4.63-7)

The very 'value of Hamlet', Lacan ventures on 8 April 1959, is that it allows us to gain access to the meaning of the S(Ø) in the graph of desire—which he had been developing in the previous two seminars. This S(Ø), Lacan explains, stands as the signifier of the final inconsistency of the Other. It marks the absence of some final guarantor or 'Other of the Other' that could answer the *che vuoi?* [what do you want?] question that every child addresses to the Other. To evoke what Nietzsche says about the play, we could say that this S(Ø) is Lacan's more analytic figuring of the abyss into which Hamlet is alleged to have stared, at the heart of the enigma of Being:

The meaning of what Hamlet learns from his father is [...] the irredeemable, absolute, unplumbable betrayal of love. Of the purest love, the love of this king who perhaps of course, like any man, may have been a great rogue but who with this being who was his wife would go so far as to keep the wind away from her face. At least according to what Hamlet tells us (Lacan 1958–59a: Session 16, p. 256).
It is Hamlet’s inability to fathom this $S(\emptyset)$ that sees him as ‘fixed’ in the tendrils of his mother’s desire. Since he cannot move this mountain, he remains ‘nothing but the reverse side of a message which is not his own’ (ibid.: Session 17, p. 265). Hamlet, Lacan argues, is a play that comes from the underworld, in the precise sense of the Acheron that Freud tells us he would move, in the epigraph to The Interpretation of Dreams, since it was not given to him to be able to move heaven. In terms of Lacan’s development of Freudian theory, this play is about what persists when the symbolic order fails and what ensues when there is something rotten at the heart of this order.4

When Hamlet’s father’s ghost appears, his appearance itself attests, in the terms that Lacan develops, that there is an unpaid symbolic debt of the exact type that psychoanalysis confronts in neuroses. The ghost cannot find peace until this debt has been paid, his story has been told, and his memory has been mourned as it ought to be:

What Hamlet finds himself confronted with in this ‘to be or not to be’ is the encountering of the place taken by what his father has said to him. And what his father has said to him qua ghost, is that he had been surprised by death ‘in the blossoms of my sin’ [Shakespeare 2003: 1.5.76]. It is a matter of encountering the place taken by the sin of the other, the unpaid sin. The one who knows is on the contrary, contrary to Oedipus, someone who has not paid for this crime of existing (Lacan 1958–59a: Session 13, p. 213).

4 From its very first lines, Lacan notes, there are extraordinary indicators of this failing of the symbolic in Hamlet’s Denmark (ibid.: Session 14, p. 223). In a choice instance of the transitivity that characterizes the imaginary, it is the visitor Bernardo at the play’s opening who, approaching the guard, asks: ‘who’s there?’, necessitating a correction by Francisco, the rightful protector of the realm: ‘Nay, answer me, stand, and unfold your­self’ (Shakespeare 2003: 1.1.1–2). And what, after all, are all those oppressions that speak to Hamlet about the desirability of suicide, if not an inventory of abuses against the order of the symbolic Law:

| Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, |
| The pangs of disprized love, the law’s delay, |
| The insolence of office, and the spurns |
| That patient merit of th’unworthy takes (ibid.:3.1.71–4). |
Unlike the father of Freud’s dream who did not know he was dead, the uncanny thing about the ghost is that he has seen exactly how he met his mortal end. More than this, Hamlet’s father is all-too-awake to what Lacanians describe as the real of jouissance (‘father, can’t you see I’m burning’ [Freud 1953: 509]), to which the father in the Freudian dream remains in the dark. The text intimates that Hamlet senior is, indeed, suffering things well beyond the order of the pleasure principle, or mortal imagination:

I am thy father’s spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand an end,
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood
(Shakespeare 2003: 1.5.9–22).

For Hamlet, Lacan hence notes, this question, ‘to be or not to be’, is not as simple or as general and abstract a matter as a philosopher might take it to be. He is no atheist, whatever they taught him at Wittenberg. At the very least, Hamlet illustrates the popular (mis)reading of Lacan’s dictum that the true formula of atheism is ‘God is unconscious’ (1998a: 59). The agnosticism Hamlet professes about what lies beyond the grave in the ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy gives way only too readily when the opportunity of killing Claudius arises as he sits praying, after the Schauerspiel. In Lacan’s words, Hamlet is very worried about ‘the eternal “to be” of Claudius’ (1958–59a: Session 14, p. 228).
And this is what stays his hand, nothing like the supposed doubts of a would-be atheist or fledgling modern man unable to act absent theological orientation.

On one level, in layman’s terms, we can rightly say that Hamlet wants Claudius to go to hell, which his father’s ghost has attested very clearly as a prospect. What interests us, from the Lacanian perspective, is what is at stake in this undying ‘to be’—and so what of Claudius might be involved in that other scene, beyond the mortal coil, where he might go to heaven or to hell. For this undying ‘to be’, Lacan contends, lies exactly in the register of what in the first part of this essay we saw as the signification of the phallus, veiled in the ancient mysteries and primordially repressed with the instauration of the symbolic order in the life of each subject. This uncanny ‘to be’ is what lies beyond or beneath the symbolic order: in the real of unmediated desire wherein Hamlet’s father suffers without cease for unspeakable sins, and wherein a woman, the mother, can unspeakably pass over a noble husband’s memory for a usurper’s bed. For Hamlet, it fairly obtrudes in the unmediated desire his mother bears for Claudius, who he is thus systematically unable to act against.

Lacan’s unifying claim is that, above all, *Hamlet* ought to be considered, if not exactly a *Trauerspiel* (tragedy), a play about the failure to mourn. ‘From the beginning of *Hamlet,*’ he comments at the beginning of his last session on the play, ‘there is nothing but talk of mourning’ (ibid.: Session 19, p. 295). In the first instance, it is Gertrude’s failure to mourn her first husband that shapes what follows: ‘the funereal baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables’ (Shakespeare 2003: 1.2.180–1). As Lacan puts it:

> [W]ith respect to the dead person, the one who has just died, something has not been performed which are called rites: rites assigned, when all is said and done, for what? What are funeral rites? The rites through which we satisfy . . . the memory of the dead person. What are they if not the total, massive intervention from earth to heaven of the symbolic operation (1958–59a: Session 18, pp. 292–3).

Later, he points out that Hamlet will to try to *scream* out this failure to mourn his father by preventing Polonius’ slain body from being properly buried. Instead, he drags it round by the feet, hides it absurdly and then taunts
those who would find him: 'hide fox, and all after' (Shakespeare 2003: 4.2. 27). This is in effect how Gertrude’s failure to mourn Hamlet Senior has demeaned his memory, as if he were little better than a hunted animal: such surely is the message Hamlet’s acting out tries to convey to the Other.

Through unfolding the neurotic consequences for Hamlet of this failure to properly mourn his father, though, Shakespeare’s tragedy for Lacan stages what ensues whenever any subject has failed to symbolize the loss of our most intimate wishes, this being the universal stake of acceding to the symbolic order. However regal Hamlet idealizes his father to be, it is Gertrude’s ‘o’er-hasty marriage’ that has unhinged the young prince, so that ‘the fact is that the phallus is completely outside its usual position compared to our analysis of the Oedipal position’ (Lacan 1958–59a: Session 19, p. 308). The phallus is with the new king, Claudius, indeed. But the phallus at stake is not the signifier of the symbolic Law, whose installation would keep jouissance at bay. Claudius is instead the rival who enjoys the desire of the mother, as Freud recognized. He is the one who from Hamlet’s perspective has achieved in reality what Hamlet has only fantasized about: the pere jouisseur, rather than a bearer of symbolic authority; the man who is or would be the phallus as Thing, rather than its representative qua signifier of the symbolic order and the order of Law.

So this is why Hamlet will not strike Claudius when he can, as the latter sits at prayer. For he wants to strike at that which he symptomatically derides in Ophelia, under the repulsive aspect of everything that is nauseating in life itself: what we might term King Claudius’ second phallic body, the body invested in him by Gertrude’s unregulated passion. ‘The phallus, well and truly real here, must be attacked as such. He always stops’ (ibid.). Moreover, as Lacan echoes Polonius, there is method in Hamlet’s madness. For the phallus, ‘even when it is here well and truly real, is a shade’, something which ‘always slips through your fingers’, or in Hamlet’s telling quip is a ‘Thing of Nothing’.

We are not so much dreaming with [Hamlet] of what happens on the other side, but simply saying this, that to put in the final full stop in something does not prevent the being remaining identical to everything that he has articulated by the discourse of his life, and that here there is no ‘to be or not to be’: that the ‘to be’, whatever it is, remains eternal (ibid.: Session 14, p. 228).
'NOT TO BE': THE PRICE OF HAMLET'S DESIRE

Towards the end of the session of 18 June 1958, discussing obsessional neurosis, Lacan comments that what is basically at stake is an inability to fully engage in the symbolic order except 'by this sort of repetition which a humorist portrayed in the famous "to be or not", and the chap scratches his head in order to be able to continue: "to be or not . . .", "to be or not . . ." And it is in repeating that he is able to find the end of the sentence' (1957–58: Session 26, p. 435). There are multiple Lacanian resonances at play in this telling instance of wit. He himself associates this inability to end the sentence—at least at one remove—with Daniel Paul Schreber’s chattering birds, whose miraculous sentences would often not achieve a closure: ‘lacking now is [. . .]’ More broadly, the vel (either-or) Hamlet confronts between being and non-being speaks to the dilemma Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us we all face, as beings born into the discourse of the Other. Either we in effect choose being, with the refusal of the symbolic. Or we opt for an acceptance of the non-being of subjectivity through symbolic castration that will give us access to whatever civilization and discontents we can find in the order of Law and the signifier. The obsessional, Lacan tells us, opts for the order of the signifier. But his best intentions are troubled by what Freud identified as a preponderance of aggressivity in the construction of his desire. We think of the hypothetical violence (‘what if you were to take the razor and cut yourself’) that visited themselves upon the Rat Man (see Freud 1955: 151–318), which meant that he was forced finally to abbreviate his prayers so that they could be repeated so quickly that no doubt about his pious intentions had time to intervene: 'to be or not . . .', 'to be or not . . .', 'to be or not . . .'.

Lacan is hesitant about ‘diagnosing’ Hamlet as a literary character. Indeed, the session in ‘Desire and its Interpretation’ of 18 March 1959 contains some of Lacan’s most extended comments on his approach to literature and his rejection of the paradigm of ‘psychobiography’ which, for example, Ella Sharpe brought to her reading of Shakespeare (Lacan 1958–59a: Session 15, pp. 387–94). We can surmise, Lacan speculates, that some event or other must

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have impressed itself upon Shakespeare around 1603, which led to the unflattering presentation of so many of his heroines from after *Hamlet*, and the extraordinary shaping of this play. *Hamlet* is known to have been written soon after the death of his son Hamnet, a deep trauma for any man. But what is decisive, for Lacan, are the texts that Shakespeare has bequeathed to us. These have compelling logics that, we have seen, are amply sufficient to detain our psychoanalytic attention.

All this said, Lacan notes that there is more than something of the obsessional about Hamlet's inaction, as the bard presents it to us. The obsessional, according to Lacan's reformulation of Freud in the previous year's seminar, is someone who has from the beginning encountered the desire of the Other in the register of threatening rivalry. His manifold defences—rituals, reaction formations, the cancellation and isolation of aggressive thoughts—embody a demand for the death of the Other as this threatening, desiring being. His signature doubts and oscillations arise from the fact that like the hysteric, his flagging desire nevertheless depends on the Other's desire. The compromise formations of his neurosis all serve to delay the hour of confronting this desire, and all that it provokes within him. In the meanwhile, he sets himself to the laborious task of presenting up to the Other as so many gifts, the spectacles of his multiple feats and achievements.

Similarly, everything Hamlet does or does not do, Lacan comments, takes place in the time of the Other:

- It is in his parents' good time that he remains [in Denmark rather than leaving for Wittenberg]. It is on the time of other people that he suspends his crime: it is in his stepfather's time that he embarks for England; it is in Rosencrantz and Guildernstern's time that he is led, evidently with an ease which astonished Freud, to send them to their death thanks to a piece of trickery which is carried out very cleverly (ibid.: Session 17, p. 274).

Even when he does enter into the final confrontation whose multiple twists will lead him to his act, it is at the beck and call of Claudius: 'Sir, I will walk here in the hall. If it please his majesty, it is the breathing time of day with me. Let the foils be brought, the gentlemen willing; and the King hold his purpose,
"I'll be your foil, Laertes," says Hamlet, punning on three senses of the word: the swords the two will wield; how Hamlet will, like a jewel case, set off his rival's brilliance; but also, thirdly, how he will be Laertes' nemesis in the duel (ibid.: Session 18, pp. 287–8). He does not know that the tip of Laertes' sword or foil has been laced with poison, and that he will shortly indeed wield it fatally against both Laertes and the king, having been poisoned himself. The price, then, of his assumption of the capacity to act is that he is mortally wounded by this death-dealing phallus and knows himself to be dying. Hamlet's accession to his symbolic mandate remains an accession which is too late, and the final belated, successful act remains 'a botched piece of work' (ibid.: Session 13, p. 214). Or, in the language of Lacan's thinking, the 'not to be', that we can say should have been stabilized in the symbolic order by the rightful, timely mourning of the Name-of-the-Father, has to return in the real before Hamlet can fully accede to the rightful action. This is the key to the story Hamlet delegates to Horatio to tell, certainly as it is retold by Jacques Lacan.

References

ENGLISH SOURCES


FRENCH SOURCES


