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# To Be or Not to Be a (Dead) Father

Maria Aristodemou\*

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that Hamlet's tragedy shows the idiosyncratic intervention of the law in the creation of human subjectivity, an intervention that relies on the agency of a (dead) father to regulate the subject's desire. Hamlet's tragedy, it suggests, is characteristically modern not because Hamlet unconsciously desired to do what Oedipus consciously did, but because of the added ingredient of Hamlet's, and of the father's, knowledge: Hamlet not only knows of the father's death, he also knows that the father knows. In Hamlet the prior father, the father of *Totem and Taboo*, is reincarnated in the person of Claudius so the 'progress' from Oedipus to Hamlet, is from tragedy to obscenity. The Crown as phallus is called upon to conceal the obscenity but Hamlet, like any good analyst, plays and displays language to reveal the rotten crime at the heart of the State of Denmark and of the Law.

*'tis a fault to heaven  
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature  
To reason most absurd, whose common theme  
Is death of fathers<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. WHY WAS HAMLET SENT TO ENGLAND?

The short answer, the one the Gravedigger has no hesitation in offering, is that Hamlet was sent to England because he was mad. Even loquacious Polonius is uncharacteristically direct on this point: 'your noble son', he informs Gertrude, 'is mad:

Mad mad I call it, for to define true madness,  
What is it but to be nothing else but mad?<sup>2</sup>

As it does not become the Royal Court of Denmark to be populated by mad princes, the obvious remedy is to ship mad royalty to England: 'A shall recover his wits there,' the gravedigger asserts confidently. 'Or if' a not, 'tis no great matter there.'<sup>3</sup>

What is this madness that is welcome, indeed normal, in England, but so threatening to the Court of Denmark? This article will explore Hamlet's so-called madness,

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1 I.2.104 The Arden Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Bloomsbury 2006); all references in the text are to this edition.

2 Hamlet (n 1) 2.2.92-94.

3 Hamlet (n 1) 5.1.141-141.

his 'sore distraction'<sup>4</sup> as he calls it, focusing on the pivotal role of the law in determining the formation of human subjectivity. Its wager is that both Hamlet's 'antic disposition' and what is 'rotten in the state of Denmark' is by no means exclusive to Hamlet and to the state of Denmark but is constitutive of every subject and of every system, including the legal system. It forms, as Žižek has theorized, the obscene underside to our subjectivity and to our systems, usually hidden and out of view but bound to erupt when the structures holding the subject and the system together explode under pressure. The article will trace Hamlet's and the Danish Kingdom's itinerary to this obscene core not least because, as regards multiple other varieties of 'Hamletic' literature (as Lacan called it), 'there's already plenty enough to paper the walls with.'<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, with its plethora of classifications for mental illness<sup>6</sup> (and attendant medication sponsored by pharmaceutical companies), psychoanalysis recognizes just three psychic structures: the common neurosis most of us suffer from, the less common psychosis and thirdly perversion. All three psychic structures revolve around the subject's varied ability to negotiate the intervention of the law, beginning with the laws of language. How does the subject respond to the threat of separation, how does it countenance the possibility of lack, what, in psychoanalysis is termed castration? Needless to say, every subject reacts defensively to the threat of loss; yet sooner or later, she comes to appreciate that her own resources are not a match to those of the symbolic order and an (unequal) negotiation begins to take place. What form this negotiation takes determines the subsequent itinerary of the subject. Although not many subjects' itineraries end up as tragic as Hamlet's, we can be certain of one thing: no human's itinerary is a happy one.

As we pointed out, within the infinite variety human misery can take, psychoanalysis recognizes just three diagnostic categories: neurosis, psychosis and perversion, all three of which are determined by the subject's negotiation of the presence of the law. While we common (and unremarkable) neurotics take cognizance of and abide, more or less successfully and more or less of the time with the dictates of the symbolic order, including legal and social commands and prohibitions, repressing our forbidden desires, psychotics are characterized by a refusal, repudiation or what Lacan terms (following the legal term for mortgaged property), 'foreclosure' of the law. The neurotic may not like, approve of, or accept the law; nevertheless, if only negatively, she acknowledges its existence, acquiesces (more or less reluctantly) to its symbolic efficiency, and relegates her forbidden desires to the unconscious. The psychotic on the other hand, doesn't just ignore, dispute or challenge the law: s/he denies, repudiates, 'forecloses' it and replaces it with an alternate reality.<sup>7</sup> For the

4 Hamlet (n 1) 5.2.207.

5 Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X* (Polity 2014) 35.

6 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* <<http://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>> accessed 24 June 2017.

7 In 'The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIX (1923–24), (Vintage 2001) 185 Freud clarifies the distinction between the two psychic states: 'Both neurosis and psychosis are expressions of a rebellion on the part of the id against the external world, of its unwillingness – of, if one prefers, its incapacity – to adapt itself to the

psychotic the presence of the law never quite gelled in the fabric of her psyche so its injunctions come, if at all, not from within the subject but from the outside, from the Real as Lacan calls it, in the form, for instance, of hallucinations. Lastly, and arguably the subject most pre-occupied with the law is neither the neurotic who knows of, but resents, its existence, nor the psychotic, who forecloses its reality and encounters it from outside, but the pervert whose strategy of defiance against the law is calculated to challenge the law into manifesting itself. There is no more effective way of ensuring the law's existence than to keep provoking it into proving its very being.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. ENTER THE FATHER

While lawyers usually begin by presupposing the existence of and operation of the law in human societies, psychoanalysts aim to excavate the origins of the law in the subject, emphasizing the decisive role it plays in determining the subject's psychic structure. Its wager is that, for better or worse, each subject's idiosyncratic make-up is more or less determined at the Oedipal stage, although minor negotiations or modifications can be achieved in the course of the subject's lifetime.<sup>9</sup> What form does the introduction of the law take and who is the agent for introducing it?

The influence and dissemination of Freudian doctrine over the last century has meant a casual familiarity with the notion of the intervention of the law through the subject's negotiation of the Oedipal complex: fearing castration, the story goes, the subject submits to the first law of any human society, the prohibition of incest. In 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', Freud revisits the conflict between the child's narcissistic interest in his penis and libidinal investment in his parental objects; narcissism, Freud concludes, wins, and the child turns away from the parent.<sup>10</sup> Lacan similarly summarizes the significance of the Oedipus complex in his reading of *Hamlet*: 'the psychoanalytic tradition sees in Oedipus' crime the quintessential charting of the relationship of the subject to what we call the Other, ie to the locus of the inscription of the law.'<sup>11</sup> The most important thing for the subject's baptism into the law, he adds, is 'punishment, sanction, castration – the hidden key to the humanization of sexuality'.<sup>12</sup>

What Freud theorized as the father's metaphorical threat of castration is developed in Lacan as the No and Name-of-the-Father: the prohibitive 'No' introduced to sever the child's imaginary unity with the mother introduces the dimension of the symbolic order, a third register outside the child's dyadic relationship with the mother. The subject's baptism in the symbolic order starts before the subject is even

exigencies of reality . . . neurosis does not disavow the reality, it only ignores it; psychosis disavows it and tries to replace it.'

8 Joël Dor, *Structure and Perversions* (Other Press 2001) 149: 'the pervert first posits the law of the father (and castration) as an existing limit, so as to go on to show that it is perhaps not a fixed law since one can always take the risk of overstepping it.'

9 'The game is already played, the die is cast. It is already cast, with this following proviso, that we can pick it up again and throw it anew.'—Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, Book II (1954-1955)* (W.W. Norton 1991) 219.

10 Freud (n 7), *Volume XIX* (1924) 176.

11 Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*' in Shoshana Fleman (ed), *Literature and Psychoanalysis; The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (John Hopkins University Press 1982) 42.

12 *ibid* 43.

born through kinship nominations and continues with its immersion in the laws of language. In Lacan's reading of Freud there is only one arch-law, the law of the signifier: the signifier determines the subject long before she is born, inscribing her in the symbolic order of laws and institutions: 'the signifier', Lacan insists, 'commands. The signifier is, first and foremost, imperative'.<sup>13</sup> For Hamlet and for all of us, subjectivity arises 'at the level of the signifier, of the *to be or not to be*, at the level of his being'.<sup>14</sup>

Lacan calls the agent for the introduction of the law in the subject the Law-of-the-Father, a term that continues to raise eyebrows so it is important to remember that this 'father' need not be the biological father nor biologically male. Indeed, the function of the father is entirely fictional: to perform the fiction of setting a limit where none exists in the Real: 'It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law'.<sup>15</sup> So while the mother is, we can still say, a biological fact, the father's role is a fiction, or in Lacan's terms, a semblance.<sup>16</sup> The semblance of a limit not only gives rise to the subject's desire, it also enables the subject to blame the law for the inherent impossibility of satisfying that desire. If the subject is lacking, dissatisfied, 'castrated, it's because of the law . . . *Dad's the one who did all that*'.<sup>17</sup>

The Oedipus complex, therefore, turns two into three, transporting the subject from its dyadic relationship with the mother to the triangular existence that encompasses the symbolic order. In contrast to Freud's emphasis on the child's desire for the mother, Lacan focuses on the mother's desire, a desire that is anterior to that of the child's, and 'not all' of which is consumed by her man or her child. Lacan's description of the mother's desire is graphically ruthless (and that before he even gets to Gertrude). 'The mother's desire is not something that is bearable just like that, that you are indifferent to. It will always wreak havoc. A huge crocodile in whose jaws you are – that's the mother. One never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap. That's what the mother's desire is'.<sup>18</sup>

So now we know: the mother is a crocodile whose jaws are clutching the child which, to survive, has to find a way to escape. What is the instrument that might protect the child from the voracious appetite of the mother? 'Improvising', Lacan has the answer: 'There is a roller, made out of stone of course, which is there, potentially, at the level of her trap, and it acts as a restraint, as a wedge. It's what is called the phallus. It's the roller that shelters you, if, all of a sudden, she closes it'.<sup>19</sup> Fear of disappearing in the enjoyment of the mother leads the subject to submit to the law which regulates jouissance. Whether that is the biological father or another figure,

13 Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973 Book XX* (W.W. Norton 1998) 32.

14 Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: Book III 1955-1956* (Routledge 1993) 168.

15 Lacan, 'Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' in Jacques Lacan (ed), *Écrits* (W.W. Norton 2006) 230–31.

16 Jacques Lacan, *The Symptom: Book XXIII* (Polity Press 2016) 116: 'the Name-of-the-father which is certainly God, is how psychoanalysis, when it succeeds, can just as well be by-passed. One can just as well by-pass it, on the condition that one can make use of it.'

17 Lacan (n 5), 199.

18 Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1968-1969 Book XVII* (W.W. Norton 2008) 112.

19 *ibid.*

the function is crucial: to introduce the subject to the realm of the symbolic order, marked by prohibitions but also, crucially, by the regulation of jouissance.<sup>20</sup> Far from being a threateningly forbidding figure, the function of the father inscribes the dimension of lack in the subject, thus enabling the subject to enjoy, but not too much: to enjoy within the pleasure principle. As Lacan summarizes, the law of the father tames unruly jouissance and turns it into desire within the law: 'The Father, the Name-of-the-Father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law.'<sup>21</sup>

### 3. THE DEAD FATHER

What is less often remembered is that the father who introduces the child to the law is the dead father. Lacan reminds us this insight of Freud's has been overlooked: 'to the question, "what is a father" Freud replies "It is the dead Father", but no one hears him.'<sup>22</sup> What does it mean the father is the dead father and how can a dead figure usher in the law? It is important here to recall Lacan's reliance on Hegel's insight that signifiers, the names of things, kill the things themselves: as Hegel puts it, 'The first act by which Adam established his lordship over the animals is this, that he gave them a name, ie, he nullified them as beings on their own account.'<sup>23</sup> Following Hegel, Lacan insists 'the word is the murder of the thing'.<sup>24</sup> The father, just like Hegel's 'thing' is dead because it is not the father the person but the father as function that institutes the law; once the function is performed, the father, like the thing killed by the word, becomes the dead father. Not only is this father dead but further, as conduit of the law, he is himself subject to the law: 'The father must be the author of the law, yet he cannot vouch for it any more than anyone else can, because he, too, must submit to the bar which makes him, insofar as he is the real father, a castrated father.'<sup>25</sup> The upshot for this good father, Lacan admits, 'is a remarkably difficult one; to a certain extent he is an insecure figure'.<sup>26</sup>

If psychosis is the foreclosure, or exclusion of the father, one of the things we can be sure Hamlet has not lacked in his short life is a father to introduce the mediation between child and mother and signal the presence of the law. The function of the name of the father that is constitutive of the subject's desire and insertion in the symbolic order is, in Hamlet's case, not only metaphorical but literal: the son has been endowed with the same name as the father. If the introduction of the name of the father was, if not too much then at least enough at the Oedipal stage, Hamlet's tragedy when we encounter him is being surrounded by too many fathers: an undead

20 Lacan (n 5), 150: 'The neurotic shows us that he does indeed need to go via the institution of the law itself in order to sustain his desire. More than any other subject, the neurotic highlights the exemplary fact that he can only desire in accordance with the law. He can only give his desire its status as unsatisfied or as impossible.'

21 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Penguin 1979) Seminar XI, 34.

22 Lacan (n 15), 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectics of Desire', *Écrits*, 688.

23 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit* (State University of New York Press 1979) 221.

24 'The symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire.' *Écrits* (n 15) 262.

25 Lacan (n 11) 44.

26 Jacques Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Book VII (1959-1960)*, ed Jacques-Alain Miller (Routledge 1992) 181.

father who knows he is dead (but will not—yet—join the ranks of the dead), and a new father, very much living and, for Hamlet, inescapable. Surrounded by a mother who is now also his aunt and an uncle who is now also his father he is, as he tells Claudius ‘too much in the son’.<sup>27</sup>

If the elder Hamlet was the benign symbolic father who introduced the law but now, dead, occupies the realm of the undead seeking vengeance, Claudius in his disguise as Hamlet’s father is all too real and all too alive. Far from the dead and benign father of the symbolic order, Claudius represents, as we’ll see later, a father of an older, archaic order, the insatiable, obscene father of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. For now we must note that, since the function of the father is to constitute and regulate the subject’s desire in accordance with the law, the preponderance of fathers in Shakespeare’s play leaves young Hamlet so overwhelmed that he appears, when we first meet him, devoid, indeed empty of desire.

#### 4. A MODERN OEDIPUS?

Whether or not the Oedipus complex is Freud’s dream (as Lacan calls it<sup>28</sup>) the importance of the myth, as all myths, is to rewrite and make digestible a contradiction, an anti-nomy, as Claude-Lévi Strauss argued, which is irresolvable. Perceiving a deadlock in our understanding of the formation of human subjectivity, a myth emerges to help us overcome it by replacing the ingredients of the problem with new terms.<sup>29</sup> If the Oedipal drama served to illustrate the trauma of the introduction of the law to the subject’s psychic structure, what does the myth of Hamlet contribute?

When, in a letter to Fliess, Freud first broached the idea of what was to become the most famous psychoanalytic complex in history, Freud’s introduction of the idea is made in the same breath as a reference to *Hamlet*. He suggests, first, that the Oedipus legend continues to move audiences because each of us ‘recoils in horror from the dream-fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the whole quota of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one’. Then:

A fleeting idea has passed through my head of whether the same thing may not lie at the bottom of Hamlet as well . . . How can Hamlet the hysteric justify his words ‘Thus conscience does make cowards of us all’, how can he explain his hesitation in avenging his father by the murder of his uncle – he, the same man who sends his courtiers to their deaths without a scruple and who is positively precipitate in killing Laertes? How better could he justify himself than by the torment he suffers from the obscure memory that he himself had meditated the same deed against his father from passion for his mother, and – ‘use

27 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.67.

28 Lacan (n 18) 112.

29 Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’ (1955) 68 (270) *The Journal of American Folklore* 428. Contrasting the approach of psychoanalysts to that of anthropologists Lévi-Strauss remarks: ‘In the one case, the progression is from experience to myths and from myths to structure. In the other, a myth is invented to explain the facts, in other words, one behaves like the sick man instead of diagnosing him.’ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Beacon Press 1969) 492.

every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?' His conscience is his unconscious sense of guilt.<sup>30</sup>

What Freud proposes as a fleeting idea a century ago appears to our 21st century ears as both familiar and self-evident: Hamlet infinitely postpones avenging his father's murder for the simple reason that his uncle merely performed what Hamlet himself wanted to do: to kill his father and marry his mother. A decade later, Freud confirms his intuition:

The myth of King Oedipus who killed his father and took his mother to wife, reveals, with little modification, the infantile wish which is later opposed and repudiated with the barrier against incest. Shakespeare's Hamlet is equally rooted in the soil of the incest complex but under better disguise.<sup>31</sup>

Freud's followers, including Ernest Jones and Otto Rank, were quick to take up and develop the theme of Hamlet's repressed Oedipal desires.<sup>32</sup> Following Otto Rank, Lacan skilfully points out that these desires are rehearsed at a second level not only in Shakespeare's play but in Shakespeare's 'play within the play'. The character Lucianus who plays Claudio and carries out the murder in 'the play within the play', is the nephew of the character playing the King; Lucianus, therefore, occupies the same position vis-a-vis the King-player as Hamlet vis-à-vis Claudius; or, as Lacan summarizes, 'what Hamlet has represented on the stage is, in the end, himself carrying out the crime in question'.<sup>33</sup>

What is the 'better disguise' Freud refers to as marking the 'advance' from Oedipus to Hamlet? The better disguise Freud suggests is what we have come to understand as the mechanism of repression. Modern man may abide by the law but his unconscious desire to break it cannot be hidden from the superego which punishes the subject with ever-increasing doses of guilt. The more Hamlet represses his desire, the more the superego preys on him for betraying his desire. It is this divorce between unconscious desire and (often lack of) conscious action that plagues modern subjectivity generally and Hamlet, in particular, suggests Lacan: 'Why', he asks, 'on the threshold of the modern period would Hamlet bear witness to the special weakness of future man as far as action is concerned?'<sup>34</sup> Hamlet's apathy we'll see is due not only to the extinction of his desire but also to his knowledge of the father's knowledge of his own impotence and murder. It is, we could say, not (only) ontological but epistemological.

As if finding out his father was not as valued as he thought he was, the entrance of the Ghost rubs in the father's own knowledge of his own ignominious death. Far

30 Freud (n 7), Letter 71, dated Vienna, 15 October 1897 *Volume 1 (1886-1899)*266.

31 Freud (n 5), 'Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis', *Volume XI (1910)*47.

32 Alfred Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (W.W. Norton Co 1976 [1954]); Otto Rank, 'The Play Within Hamlet: Toward an Analysis and Dynamic Understanding of the Work' in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth* (John Hopkins UP 2004).

33 Lacan (n 5), 35.

34 Lacan, (n 26) 251.



from impressive, old Hamlet appears ‘offended’,<sup>35</sup> ‘a countenance more in sorrow than in anger’,<sup>36</sup> he refuses to speak and stalks away when called. After imparting the story of his murder to his son, the injection of knowledge shifts the ancient tragedy to the trauma of modern subjectivity: ‘the thing that distinguishes Hamlet from Oedipus’, asserts Lacan, ‘is that Hamlet *knows*’.<sup>37</sup> What does Hamlet know? He knows his father was killed, but more importantly, he knows that his father knows. It is not just the knowledge of the subject, but the knowledge of the Other and the knowledge the subject has of the Other’s knowledge. Hamlet now cannot pretend that the Other doesn’t know, thereby keeping his own knowledge unconscious. Unwittingly, Hamlet now occupies the position of the young boy in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. As Žižek suggests in his re-reading of the tale, the little boy’s public outburst that the emperor is wearing no clothes breaks the implicit agreement shared by the community that ‘the big Other has to be kept in ignorance about the fact’ that he is naked. Once that agreement is broken, the social link is dissolved.<sup>38</sup>

Hamlet is now thrust, willy-nilly, in the role of the little boy but, unlike Andersen’s hero, Hamlet is all too conscious of the significance of his knowledge: the Other has lifted the veil for him and Hamlet had no choice but to hear it. And Hamlet wishes he hadn’t heard it so that he could have kept the illusion of a powerful father. It is a conflict with knowledge that, as Guy Trobas has argued, is characteristic of our time: the depressed modern subject, Trobas claims, rejects unconscious knowledge, ‘a conflict with knowledge that can reach a point of true epistemic anorexia’.<sup>39</sup>

It is this modern subject, marked by a division between truth and knowledge, that Lacan insists is the subject of psychoanalysis.<sup>40</sup> Indeed for Freud, it is the appearance, and flamboyant insistence of the mechanism of repression that marks the ‘progress’ from Oedipus’s to Hamlet’s tragedy. From *Oedipus* to *Hamlet*, he says, we see ‘the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind’.<sup>41</sup> What Freud’s generosity calls ‘progress’ and ‘advance’ we may refer to as regression; a regression that is paid for by means of the modern symptom par excellence, depression.

## 5. A MODERN AFFLICTION

If there is one thing we all remember about Hamlet, it is his unmitigated and inconsolable suffering. His famous soliloquies have marked him out among spectators and readers as the first quintessentially modern hero, modern in his beliefs, introspective sensibilities and of course, his suffering. And perhaps there is no greater indicator of

35 Hamlet (n 1) 1.1.59.

36 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.230.

37 Lacan (n 11) 19.

38 *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As A Political Factor*, (Verso 2002)11–12.

39 Guy Trobas, ‘Depression ... Of Repression and Modern Symptoms’ (2006) (15)Psychoanalytical Notebooks, *The Names of the Father*, 93.

40 ‘I dare to state as a truth that the Freudian field was possible only a certain time after the emergence of the Cartesian subject in so far as modern science began only after Descartes made his inaugural step.’ Lacan (n 21) 47.

41 *The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Edition, Volume IV* (1900)264.

Hamlet's modernity than his affliction by the modern disease par excellence, what we have come to call depression.

In contrast to other characters in the play, starting with his friends who can't fathom why Hamlet is so down in the dumps, and who insist he should get up and join the party, in contrast also to an array of commentators including T.S. Eliot (for whom Hamlet's depression lacks 'objective correlative'<sup>42</sup>) spectators appreciate Hamlet has every reason to be depressed: Hamlet has not only lost an idealized father. He also has to countenance the horror that this idealized object was not as admired and revered as he believed him to be. Hamlet's mother has overcome her grief at her husband's death quickly enough to marry her husband's brother: as she herself realizes that must be the 'head and source of [her] son's distemper:

I doubt is no other than the main –  
His father's death and our hasty marriage.

Claudius, we are given to understand, is not up to scratch in Hamlet's eyes, neither as a man nor as a King in comparison: where Old Hamlet was 'Hyperion', Claudius is a 'satyr'<sup>43</sup> 'a bloody bawdy villain/Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous kindles villain'.<sup>44</sup> And, in case Gertrude doesn't get the picture Hamlet continues, 'A murderer, a villain/A slave that is not twentieth part the kith of your precedent lord, a vice of kings, a king of shreds and patches'.<sup>45</sup>

We see in Hamlet's predicament an illustration of the distinction made by Freud and developed by Lacan between the subject's ideal ego and her ego ideal: the ideal ego is the image we emulate, an image that, as the name goes, belongs to the imaginary. The ego ideal, by contrast, is the point from which we emulate: that is, the person or persons we try to impress with our ideal ego. So if the ideal ego is the person we strive to be, the ego ideal is the person for whom we want to be that ideal.<sup>46</sup> In Hamlet's scenario, if his father occupied the position of the ideal ego, someone he emulated and identified with, for whose eyes was this identification aimed? Who other than Gertrude was Hamlet's ego ideal? Hamlet's tragedy is that at one stroke he has been deprived of both his ideal ego and his ego ideal: he lost not only his father, but his father's idealized image in the eyes of his mother has also been shattered. Finding out that his ideal father was not as idealized as he believed him to be, Hamlet's fantasy structure collapses. Gertrude's inadequate mourning shatters Hamlet's ideal images, not only of his mother, but of his father and, inevitably, given his own ego is tied up with his objects of identification, of himself.

The archetypal image of Hamlet on stage is that of a subject who, as he says himself, has

42 TS Eliot, 'Hamlet and His Problems' in *Selected Essays* 1921 (Faber & Faber 1999).

43 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.140.

44 Hamlet (n 1) 2.2.516-7.

45 Hamlet (n 1) 3.4.53.

46 Lacan (n 21) 268: 'The point of the ego ideal is that from which the subject will see himself, as one says, *as others see him*, - which will enable him to support himself in a dual situation that is satisfactory for him from the point of view of love.'

lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.<sup>47</sup>

The earth and everything in it have become sterile because Hamlet has not only lost an object of desire but the *cause* that rendered that object desirable. In the case of his mother and Ophelia, Hamlet is the textbook case of the melancholic subject who *has* the object but has lost the desire for it. As he puts it (long before Lacan), he is 'unpregnant of any cause'.<sup>48</sup> Hamlet's fury at both his mother and Ophelia is the fury of a man robbed not only of his ideal object but of the cause that rendered the object ideal. If Gertrude no longer serves as the mirror reflecting his father's glorious image, Hamlet also sees, in Ophelia, a future Gertrude who will similarly be unwilling to reflect back to him his image (at twice its natural size as Virginia Woolf memorably put it.) 'Oh frailty, you name is woman'<sup>49</sup> he accuses, and to Ophelia's protest that the play is 'brief, he sharply retorts, 'as woman's love'.<sup>50</sup>

The person Hamlet berates first and foremost, however, is neither his mother, nor Ophelia, but himself: 'I do not set my life at a pin's fee'<sup>51</sup> he claims,

I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape or time to act them in.<sup>52</sup>

Freud advises us to be cautious of such self-disparaging protests: the melancholic's insistence that she is worthless is often a veiled rebuke not at herself (as she vainly protests) but at the love object she was disappointed by. The scenario is familiar: when the object rejects or disappoints us, rather than abandoning it we identify with, indeed become, it. So when we purport to reproach ourselves for not being good enough, as Hamlet so flamboyantly does, we are really reproaching the 'not good enough' object that let us down. The subject berates and debases the object, resorting to depression to avoid expressing her hostility to it openly. 'No neurotic,' writes Freud, 'harbors thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses against others'.<sup>53</sup> Declaring the object worthless or, better still, dead, is one way for the subject to overcome her narcissistic attachment to the object.

47 Hamlet (n 1) 2.2.262-269.

48 Hamlet (n 1) 2.2.502.

49 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.146.

50 Hamlet (n 1) 3.2.146-147.

51 Hamlet (n 1) 1.4.65.

52 Hamlet (n 1) 3.1.122-126.

53 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud (n 7) *Volume XIV* (1914-16)252.

Freud goes further and suggests that when Hamlet protests he is worthless and surrounded by unworthiness, we should believe him: if the subject berates himself for being useless, incapable of love and achievement (as, in his view, is everyone else), we should really take him at his word: he really *is* worthless!<sup>54</sup> ‘He has lost his self-respect and he must have reason for this.’<sup>55</sup> And the reason is that part of his ego has detached itself from him, set itself against him, and judges him critically: ‘the shadow of the object’, as Freud memorably put it, ‘has fallen upon the ego’.<sup>56</sup>

Lacan adds more nuance to our understanding of every subject’s, including the melancholic’s, fraught relationship to the object of her desire. In contrast to Freud, for Lacan the subject is devastated not only when they have lost or are in danger of losing the object, but when they are in danger of finding it: when they are in danger of losing the loss itself.<sup>57</sup> Rather than mourning for King Hamlet, we can see Hamlet as resentful and anxious of the fact that his father’s death has left him ‘too close’ to the maternal object. Without the intervening agent of the father to regulate his desire in accordance with the law, Hamlet finds himself too close to Gertrude who, as Claudius puts it, ‘lives by his looks’.<sup>58</sup>

As Guy Trobas theorized in the case of contemporary depressive states, with the decline of the function of the father, we see a repression of the mechanism of repression itself.<sup>59</sup> Even our repression is not good enough as there is no higher law to authorize the ‘quality’ of our repression. Hamlet is perhaps the first literary representation of the modern depressive subject, depressed because even his repression of his desire is not good enough. Indeed, in contrast to T.S. Elliot’s suggestion that Hamlet lacks ‘objective correlative’, the puzzle for the modern audience is not ‘Why is Hamlet depressed’ but rather, ‘What does everyone else have to be chirpy about?’

## 6. HUGGER MUGGER MOURNING

What might have helped pacify Hamlet’s tormented soul? Shakespeare, and following him, Lacan, are clear: what helps soothe (but can never fill) the hole left gaping by loss is symbolic rituals: ‘Ritual introduces some mediation of the gap opened up by mourning.’<sup>60</sup> Death makes a hole in the real and mourning is the attempt by the symbolic to mediate this gap. The signifier gets to work and a whole array of them are invoked to fill the unfillable gap:<sup>61</sup> ‘the work of mourning’, as Lacan notes, ‘is

54 *ibid* 246.

55 *ibid* 247.

56 *ibid* 252.

57 ‘We’ve always been taught that anxiety is a fear without an object. *Claptrap!* . . . For the truth I’m setting out for you I formulate as follows: anxiety is not without an object . . . anxiety introduces us to a function that is radical – the function of lack.’ Lacan (n 5), 131.

58 Hamlet (n 1) 4.7.13.

59 Trobas (n 39) 85.

60 Lacan (n 11) 40.

61 ‘The work of mourning is performed to satisfy the disorder produced by the signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence, for it is the system of signifiers in their totality which is impeached by the least instance of mourning.’ *ibid* 38.

accomplished at the level of the logos<sup>62</sup> Provided, that is, such logos is adequate and appropriate, and sufficiently lengthy in duration.

Both Lacan and Shakespeare suggest this is precisely what distinguishes humans from animals: ‘what characterizes our species’, muses Lacan, ‘is precisely the fact of surrounding cadavers with something that constitutes a grave, marking the fact that this person lived’.<sup>63</sup> Hamlet agrees: after berating his mother for moving on too quickly (‘look how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within two hours!’<sup>64</sup>) he compares her lack of mourning to that of an animal: ‘a beast that wants discourse of reason/would have mourned longer.’<sup>65</sup> It is not only the mourning for Hamlet’s father that is short and inadequate in the play: Polonius is similarly interred ‘hugger mugger’, while Ophelia’s funeral is marked by ‘maimed rites’<sup>66</sup> and, more than likely, as the gravediggers suggest, wrongly buried in sacred ground.

Lacan suggests that Ophelia and Polonius are the victims offered in expiation of the primordial offence of insufficient mourning for King Hamlet. Hamlet sarcastically suggests to Horatio that the reason for his father’s funeral and his mother’s wedding being so close together was none other than economic good sense:

Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak’d meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.<sup>67</sup>

In one of Lacan’s few references to Marx, he chides Marxism for supposedly ignoring symbolic values: ‘in the accommodations worked out by modern society between use values and exchange values there is something that has been overlooked in the Marxian analysis of economy: ritual values.’<sup>68</sup> Ironically, Marx and Engels do refer to (and value) ritual values. In *The Communist Manifesto*, they berate the bourgeoisie for precisely ignoring such values in favour of ‘callous cash payment’.<sup>69</sup> Centuries earlier Shakespeare showed a similar distrust for rising bourgeois trends with its emphasis on thrift and accumulation of capital, contrasting them to feudal aristocratic displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption. After all, ‘What is a man,’ Hamlet enquires, ‘If his chief good and market of his time/Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.’<sup>70</sup> It is the extra expenditure, the surplus and even superfluous, forms and

62 Lacan (n 11) 38.

63 Jacques Lacan, *On the Names of the Father* (Polity Press 2013) 32.

64 Hamlet (n 1) 3.2.119-120.

65 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.147.

66 Hamlet (n 1) 5.1.207.

67 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.175-180.

68 Lacan (n 11) 40.

69 ‘The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash-payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscribable freedom, Free Trade.’—Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>> accessed 24 June 2017.

70 Hamlet (n 1) 4.4.32-34.

rituals that mark the distinction between humanity and animality; neglecting them, Shakespeare suggests, is to regress to a beastly existence.

### 7. FROM TRAGEDY TO OBSCENITY

Rituals are essential to mark man from animal but what do these rituals 'mark'? What do they perform, act or enact on the human stage? For anthropologists as much as for psychoanalysts, symbolic rituals enact the system of symbolic norms and prohibitions, beginning with the laws of kinship. And it is precisely the violation of these laws that the tragedy of *Hamlet* draws attention to: Hamlet may be all about mourning, Lacan reminds us, but the focus on mourning should not deceive us: 'at the bottom of this mourning, in Hamlet as in Oedipus, there is a crime.'<sup>71</sup>

The prohibition of incest is the first law of any human society, distinguishing man from animal and nature from culture; in that sense, as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, the incest prohibition is 'the basis of human society, in a sense it is society'.<sup>72</sup> This first law would not be possible without language: 'For without names for kinship relations, no power can institute the order of preferences and taboos that knot and braid the thread of lineage through the generations.'<sup>73</sup> As kinship structures and prohibitions would not be possible without language, Claudius' crime is not only that of fratricide but a crime against language: by stepping into King Hamlet's shoes, and calling himself Gertrude's husband and Hamlet's father, Claudius offends and confuses kinship nominations with Gertrude now, as Hamlet accuses, being 'your husband's brother's wife'.<sup>74</sup>

We saw earlier that the father introducing the law to the subject is the dead father. In the tragedy of *Hamlet*, however, despite the death of the father, 'we cannot help but notice', Lacan points out, that '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.'<sup>75</sup> This is a different father to the benign father of the Oedipus complex who acculturates the child to the symbolic order and gives birth to desire. Claudius is called upon to embody the father who preceded the installation of the law and whom Freud mythologized in *Totem and Taboo*. As Lacan summarizes, 'The primal father is the father prior to the prohibition of incest, prior to the appearance of the Law – the order of marriage and kinship structures – in a word, prior to the appearance of culture.'<sup>76</sup> Far from benignly introducing the law and making room for the subject's desire, this father is the pre-symbolic father of jouissance who monopolizes enjoyment and arrogates it all to himself. If there is a father to kill then it is *this* father, yet Hamlet continuously and conspicuously postpones doing it.

Does this mean Hamlet's itinerary follows Marx's famous repost to Hegel, 'that all facts and all personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice . . . the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.<sup>77</sup> Is Hamlet, perhaps, the

71 Lacan (n 11) 41.

72 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Harper & Row 1969) 12.

73 *Écrits* (n 15) 230–31.

74 *Hamlet* (n 1) 3.4.14.

75 Lacan (n 11) 50.

76 Lacan, (n 63) 74.

77 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/hist-mat/18-brum/ch07.htm>> accessed 24 June 2017.

buffoon to Oedipus's tragic hero? This is the argument made by Peter Stallynbrass: that just like in Marx's text, Napoleon III farcically repeats his uncle Napoleon I, Hamlet the son farcically repeats his father Hamlet. 'Both narratives depend upon the repetition of a name (Napoleon, Hamlet), both conjure up a tragic world which has been displaced by a farcical one.'<sup>78</sup> In contrast to Stallynbrass, I suggest that rather than a descent into buffoonery, *Hamlet* signals a descent into obscenity. Žižek sees in the myth of *Hamlet* a crystallization of the truth of *Oedipus*: even though *Oedipus* is the grounding myth of Western civilization, its true import, argues Žižek, is not apparent until *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is not just the inverse of *Oedipus*, as Ernest Jones argued, with Hamlet unconsciously wanting to do what Oedipus had consciously done; instead *Hamlet* brings to light what Oedipus disavowed: The knowledge about the father's obscenity.<sup>79</sup> For Žižek the truth of Oedipus is revealed in *Hamlet* and it is not pretty: The truth of the symbolic father is its obscene underside and the truth of the legal system is the crime at its origin. Symbolic authority is, therefore, smeared with obscenity and irrevocably undermined from within. The state, and the legal system, as Claudius admits, is 'disjoint and out of frame'<sup>80</sup> while the Ghost accurately insists that 'the whole ear of Denmark/Is by a forged process of my death/Rankly abused'.<sup>81</sup>

Claudius is under no illusion as to the base 'basis' of his authority: 'my offence', he admits, 'is rank: it smells to heaven/It hath the primal eldest curse upon't – a brother's murder'.<sup>82</sup> His admission that he is still in possession of the fruits of his crime ('My crown, my own ambition, and my Queen.') and that no forgiveness can be forthcoming while this is the case, takes a wider resonance: it is not only 'this' prize that is tainted by crime but the constitution of a new order generally:

In the corrupted currents of this world  
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,  
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself  
Buys out the law.<sup>83</sup>

To paraphrase Lacan if *Oedipus* charts the inscription of the law on the subject, *Hamlet* charts the inscription of the law's origins.<sup>84</sup> And like Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, the myth of *Hamlet* shows 'an essential connection: the order of the law can be conceived only on the basis of something more primordial, a crime'.<sup>85</sup>

78 Peter Stallynbrass, 'Well grubbed old mole': Marx, Hamlet, and the Unfixing of Representation' (1998) 12 (1) *Cultural Studies*, 3–14, 10.

79 Hamlet (n 1), Slavoj Žižek, 'Death's Merciless Love' lacan.com (2004) <<http://www.lacan.com/zizek-love.htm>> accessed 24 June 2017.

80 Hamlet (n 1) 1.2.20.

81 Hamlet (n 1) 1.5.36–39.

82 Hamlet (n 1) 3.3.36–38.

83 Hamlet (n 1) 3.3.53–60.

84 Lacan (n 11) 42.

85 Hamlet (n 1) *ibid.*

## 8. THE HOLLOW PHALLUS

If law's origin is an anterior crime, then what is the instrument for covering up the crime? It is no news that Shakespeare's plays, the history plays in particular, disseminated and perpetuated James's I and VI's doctrine of the divine right of Kings. Rosencrantz in *Hamlet* is particularly obsequious describing the King as 'that spirit upon whose weal depends and rests/The lives of many'.<sup>86</sup> It is also clear that Shakespeare laid the groundwork for a re-examination of monarchy, casually reminding us for instance, as Hamlet does in the graveyard scene, that the King, after all, is a mortal man like the rest of us: 'A man may fish the worm that hath eat of a King and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.'<sup>87</sup> The ideology of the divine right of kings is particularly questioned, and laid open for interrogation, by drawing attention to the gap between the (all too human, if not pathetic) person occupying the office of King and the symbolic role: the gap that Eric Kantorowicz elaborated between 'the king's two bodies', between the person occupying the office and the rights and duties bestowed on the person wearing that 'hollow crown'.<sup>88</sup>

Lacanian psychoanalysis has a term for that 'hollow crown' and it is none other than phallus. Like the term Name-of-the-Father, the term phallus has attracted criticism so what, if anything, does it mean? Perhaps, the best way of describing the signifier phallus is that it signifies nothingness itself. Phallus does not denote the anatomical penis but stands in for an absence: the impossible fullness of meaning.<sup>89</sup> Lacan describes it variously as a 'paper tiger', a 'ghost' which enters when signification fails, an impostor used to cover up lack, and 'the signifier for which there is no signified'.<sup>90</sup> The phallus is structurally necessary to complete the system because it operates, as Jacques-Alain Miller argued in a seminal text, like the number zero in algebra: in Ferge's theory of cardinal numbers, the number zero counts as a number even though it is defined as emptiness. The emptiness, nevertheless, is crucial to found the sequence of numbers.<sup>91</sup> The signifier phallus performs the same function of filling the empty place. Lacan likens it to the square root of minus one,<sup>92</sup> that is, an impossible number whose sole function is to designate the impossibility of completion.

As the phallus is not a substance, and does not mean anything in itself, it functions as an appendage, an added extra to cover the emptiness: that is, the phallus is not something a subject *has* or *is*, but something added to the subject. In the case of royalty, the Crown represents the phallus: once the Crown sits on a person's head, that hollow object transforms the ordinary person into a King. In that sense, Shakespeare's Marcellus' description of the Ghost serves also as an accurate

86 3.3.14-15.

87 4.3.26-30.

88 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton UP 1981).

89 'The Signification of the Phallus', *Écrits*, 579: the phallus is not a fantasy, nor is it an object, 'still less is it the organ – penis or clitoris – that it symbolizes . . . it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier.'

90 *Encore* 80:  $\Phi$  'of all the signifiers, is the signifier for which there is no signified.'

91 Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Suture: Elements of the Logic of The Signifier' <[http://www.lacan.com/symptom8\\_articles/miller8.html](http://www.lacan.com/symptom8_articles/miller8.html)> accessed 24 June 2017.

92 Lacan (n 11) 29.



definition of the phallus: 'for it is as the air, invulnerable, And our vain blows malicious mockery.'<sup>93</sup> No wonder Hamlet has difficulty striking it; as Lacan puts it, 'one cannot strike the phallus, because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a ghost.'<sup>94</sup> Having described the phallus as a ghost, Lacan suggests that this is precisely the description fitting the function of a King: 'Replace "King" with "phallus"', he suggests, 'and you'll see that's exactly the point - the body is bound up with the phallus but the phallus is bound to nothing. It always slips through your fingers. . . .'<sup>95</sup>

Claudius is all-too aware of the divorce between the phallic signifier 'King' and the person to whom that signifier is attached: and that, far from being the rightful King to whom the appendage of the Crown would be attached, the Crown is an appendage that he has criminally arrogated to himself. Hamlet and Claudius' soliloquies show the distance between the symbolic role of King and the pathetic person it's attached to, a distance in this case, as so often, drawn in blood. The audience are similarly witnesses to the gap between Claudius' guilt-ridden person of his soliloquies and his symbolic identity, hedged, he claims, with 'such divinity . . . That treason can but peep to what it would/Act little of his will.'<sup>96</sup>

The rituals and insignia surrounding monarchy help fill the distance between the two bodies: monarchy as a political system uses the King as a figurehead that, like the phallus, is structurally necessary to close the system. Rituals foster a belief in the system, a belief which, like all beliefs, functions vicariously and from a distance: we believe because we believe someone else believes, and functions as the guarantor of our faith. The closure, however, is never flawless, the gap and the phallus covering it can always be exposed as shams, and the instrument for exposing it is none other than language. In *Hamlet*, it is Hamlet's pregnant words that unhinge the signifiers from their signified and shake that belief: Hamlet's constant play on puns and double-entendres alert his listeners not to his discourse's 'discordance' Lacan says, 'but on the contrary its special pertinence': 'Everyone wonders whether what he says is really what he means because what he says gets them all where they're the touchiest.'<sup>97</sup> In that sense Hamlet, like Polonius, is the perfect advocate for the technique of psychoanalysis, finding 'directions through indirection' and catching truth by offering his audience 'baits of falsehood'.<sup>98</sup> As he famously, and successfully, plots, 'The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.'<sup>99</sup> Freud appreciated that Hamlet hit upon the hallmark of psychoanalytic technique centuries before he did: 'Hamlet who disguises himself as a madman' Freud reminds us, 'was behaving just as dreams do in reality; so that we can say of dreams what Hamlet said of himself, concealing the true circumstances under a cloak of wit and unintelligibility'.<sup>100</sup> Lacan seems to hark back on Polonius' words when he describes 'analytic praxis' as proceeding 'toward a conquest of the truth along the path of deception'.<sup>101</sup>

93 Hamlet (n 1) 1.1.144-5.

94 Lacan (n 11) 50.

95 Lacan (n 11) 52.

96 Hamlet (n 1) 4.5.123-125.

97 Lacan (n 11) 34, 51-52.

98 Hamlet (n 1) 2.1.51.

99 Freud (n 7) 2.2.539-40.

100 Freud (n 7) *The Interpretation of Dreams, Volume V (1900-1901)*, 444.

101 Lacan (n 63), 90.

It remains for us to follow Lacan's advice and replace King with phallus to confirm the hollow nature of both King and phallus:

Hamlet: The body is with the phallus, but the phallus is not with the body.  
 The phallus is a thing  
 Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?  
 Hamlet: Of nothing<sup>102</sup>

### 9. TO ACT OR NOT TO ACT

It is not only the evanescent nature of the ghostly phallus that stays Hamlet's hand: it is also Hamlet's very own and very notorious propensity to procrastinate, a symptom he himself identifies as connected to morality or, as he terms it 'conscience'.

Thus conscience does make cowards –  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
 With this regard their currents turns awry  
 And lose the name of action.<sup>103</sup>

How would an analyst read this so-called cowardice? A Lacanian analyst, we can be sure, will have less patience with Hamlet's protests. Hamlet may accuse himself of being a coward, 'pigeon-livered and lack gall'<sup>104</sup> but the analyst would look behind these protests to gauge what they conceal about the subject's desire. Lacan's famous proposition in the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is that 'from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire.'<sup>105</sup> The challenge is how to access the subject's desire, buried as it is inside the desire of the Other, usually those close to us starting with our mothers.

The elephant in the room, that is, is that Hamlet's desire, like all hysterical subjects' desire, is not his own. His desire is borrowed from, replicated, mimics, the desire of the Other, in this case, the mother. Hamlet's desire has been buried so deeply in that of the Other that the task of extricating it leaves him paralysed with inaction. Lacan adds here that Hamlet is not only dependent on the desire of the Other, but on the time of the Other: 'Whatever Hamlet may do, he will do it only at the hour of the Other.'<sup>106</sup> So how, if at all, can Hamlet come to recognize, articulate and act on his own rather than the Other's desire?

For psychoanalysis, morality or 'conscience' as Hamlet calls it, is not a good guide to the subject's desire. Psychoanalysis ushers in a new version of the Good, the Good of desire, forcing us to rethink the distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics':

102 Hamlet (n 1) 4.3.25-28.

103 Hamlet (n 1) 3.1.90.

104 Hamlet (n 1) 2.2.512.

105 Lacan (n 26) 319.

106 Lacan (n11) 17-18.

for psychoanalysis, morality, far from being ethical, is our compensation for giving up on our desire. Conscience, as Hamlet realizes, dupes the subject into giving up on her capacity for freedom, that is, on giving up on what is properly ethical. Or, as G.K. Chesterton put it, morality is the darkest and most daring of conspiracies.<sup>107</sup> If morality is Hamlet's excuse for giving up on his desire, then morality and Hamlet are, from a psychoanalytic point of view, unethical.

How can the subject surpass mere morality and become properly ethical? For the subject to accede to the status of an ethical subject, she must come to terms with her own finitude as well as that of the Big Other, that is, jettison the belief that someone is exempt from the law of castration: that someone is non-lacking. This can only take place when the subject has dethroned the Big Other from his paper throne and stopped recognizing as well as let go of her desire to be recognized by the Other. That can only happen, simply, when he has come to terms with the fact that the Big Other doesn't exist.

The catalyst that awakens Hamlet is the death sentence delivered to him: the death sentence liberates him from his bondage to the desire of the mother so for a few short seconds, he dwells, like Antigone, in a space between two deaths: while awaiting real death, he is already symbolically dead. Only at this point does Hamlet let go of his identifications, rid himself of the desire of the Other and formulates his desire autonomously. It is at this zero level of subjectivity, at his confrontation with his own limits that Lacan suggests ethics begins.<sup>108</sup> In an Act there is no divided subject, no distance between the subject of the saying and the subject of the said. It is an act authorized not by a fictional Big Other, who is as divided and lacking as the subject is, but by himself.

If the aim of the psychoanalytic cure, as Lacan says, is to 'raise impotence to the impossible'<sup>109</sup> by unblocking the subject's desire; in Hamlet's case the unblocking takes place only at the price of death. Hamlet is only 'potent', his impotence is raised to the rank of impossibility, when he transitions from the hysterical subject, living the desire of and in the time of the Other, to the status of a dying subject. Hamlet only 'acts' when he is mortally wounded.

## 10. UNLAIID GHOSTS

If Hamlet's death is not an ethical 'act' in the psychoanalytic sense, if Hamlet unlike Oedipus, doesn't enjoy the luxury of a subsequent anagnorisis and reconciliation at Colonus, what do readers and spectators take from the tragedy? After all, in the West, Shakespeare occupied for centuries the role of 'the subject supposed to know', supposed to know, that is, the unconscious desires of us all. In *Hamlet* itself Shakespeare does not shy from suggesting the importance of the playwright's work: treat the actors well, Hamlet instructs Polonius, 'let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time.'<sup>110</sup>

107 Chesterton, 'A Defense of Detective Stories', in *The Defendant* (Wildlife Press 2008) 69.

108 Lacan (n 26) 21–22: 'Moral action is, in effect, grafted onto the real. . . [The practice of psychoanalysis] is only a preliminary to moral action as such – the so-called action being the one through which we enter the real.'

109 Lacan (n 18) 164–79.

110 Hamlet (n 1) 2.2.463.

What has the tragedy of *Hamlet* chronicled? To give an abstract and brief chronicle of my own reading: Hamlet's tragedy shows the essential, yet idiosyncratic intervention of the law in the creation of human subjectivity, an intervention that marks the subject for the rest of her itinerary. That intervention, I described, is dependent on the agency of a (dead) father to regulate the subject's desire in accordance with the law. Hamlet's tragedy, I suggested, is characteristically modern not because Hamlet unconsciously desired to do what Oedipus consciously did, but because of the added ingredient of Hamlet's, and the father's, knowledge: Hamlet not only knows of the father's death and weakness, he also knows that the father knows. It is this added knowledge that torments Hamlet and robs him of his desire, so characteristic of the condition of so-called depressed subjects in modernity. The article suggests that Hamlet's itinerary is further complicated, if not doomed, when the prior father, the father of *Totem and Taboo* reappears. In Hamlet's case, not only is this father reincarnated in the person of Claudius, but the symbolic forms and rituals that might have appeased the gap opened up by King Hamlet's death are not adhered to. Gertrude's hasty marriage sets a trail of inadequate mourning, a sin for which further sacrifices need to be offered in expiation. The so-called 'progress' from *Oedipus to Hamlet*, therefore, the article suggests, is from tragedy to obscenity. The Crown as phallus is called upon to cover the obscenity but Hamlet, like any good analyst, plays and displays language to reveal the rotten crime at the heart of the State of Denmark.

'In an analysis', Freud remarks, 'a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unladen ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken'.<sup>111</sup> This is not the first time Freud resurrects Hamlet to illustrate a psychoanalytic concept, including, famously, suggesting that Hamlet's challenge to Rosencrantz to play an instrument is no less than a defence of the psychoanalytic method itself.<sup>112</sup> Hegel too famously borrows Hamlet's metaphor of the old mole burrowing through the earth to illustrate historical progress, showing, he says, the triumphant development of the Notion of Spirit.<sup>113</sup> Marx deploys the same image to chart the progress of the revolution.<sup>114</sup> Another old mole, young Hamlet's own unladen ghost, has been woken up in this article to furrow through the relatively

111 Freud (n 7) 'A Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy', *Volume X* (1909) 122.

112 Freud explicitly credits Hamlet for his defence of psychoanalysis, paraphrasing his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: 'Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet you cannot make it speak.' 'On Psychotherapy', Freud (n 7), *Volume VII* (1901-1905) 262.

113 'This long procession of spirits is formed by the individual pulses which beat in its life; they are the organism of our substance, an absolutely necessary progression, which expresses nothing less than the nature of spirit itself, and which lives in us all. We have to give ear to its urgency – when the mole that is within forces its way on – and we have to make it a reality. It is my desire that this history of Philosophy should contain for you a summons to grasp the spirit of the time, which is present in us by nature, and – each in his own place – consciously to bring it from its natural condition, ie from its lifeless seclusion, into the light of day.' In Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: Section 3, E. Final Result <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpfinal.htm>>.

114 'But the revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still travelling through purgatory. It does its work methodically. . . . And when it has accomplished this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exult: Well burrowed old mole!'—*The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

unploughed terrain of the intersections between law and psychoanalysis while this volume as a whole has invoked a host of Shakespearean ghosts to plough the field international of dispute resolution. To readers and writers alike, burrowing in the dark for glimpses of new ways of addressing old problems, the slim hope is that one day Hamlet might say, as he tells his old man, 'Well said old mole, canst work i' th' earth so fast? A worthy pioneer.'<sup>115</sup>

115 Hamlet (n 1) 1.S.170.