

Jacques Lacan

## Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*

### *The Object Ophelia*

As a sort of come-on, I announced that I would speak today about that piece of bait named Ophelia, and I'll be as good as my word.

Our purpose, as you remember, is to show the tragedy of desire as it appears in *Hamlet*, human desire, that is, such as we are concerned with in psychoanalysis.

We distort this desire and confuse it with other terms if we fail to locate it in reference to a set of co-ordinates that, as Freud showed, establish the subject in a certain position of dependence upon the signifier. The signifier is not a reflection, a product pure and simple of what are called interhuman relationships — all psychoanalytic experience indicates the contrary. To account for the presuppositions of this experience, we must refer to a topological system without which all the phenomena produced in our domain would be indistinguishable and meaningless. The illustration shows the essential co-ordinates of this topology.

The story of *Hamlet* (and this is why I chose it) reveals a most vivid dramatic sense of this topology, and this is the source of its exceptional power of captivation. Shakespeare's poetic skill doubtless guided him along the way, step by step, but we can also assume that he introduced into the play some observations from his own experience, however indirectly.

Shakespeare's play contains one shift in the plot that distinguishes it from previous treatments of the story, including both the narratives of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest and the other plays of which we possess fragments. This shift involves the character Ophelia.

Ophelia is present, to be sure, from the beginning of the legend on. She appears in the early versions, as I've said, as the bait in

the trap that Hamlet doesn't fall into, first because he's warned in advance, and then because Ophelia herself refuses to have any part of it, having long been in love with the prince, according to Belleforest's version. Perhaps Shakespeare merely extended her function in the plot, which is to capture Hamlet's secret by surprise. But she thus becomes one of the innermost elements in Hamlet's drama, the drama of Hamlet as the man who has lost the way of his desire. She provides an essential pivot in the hero's progress toward his mortal rendezvous with his act—an act that he carries out, in some sense, in spite of himself. There is a level in the subject on which it can be said that his fate is expressed in terms of a pure signifier, a level at which he is merely the reverse-side of a message that is not even his own. Well, Hamlet is the very image of this level of subjectivity, as we shall see even more clearly in what follows.

## 1

Our first step in this direction was to express the extent to which the play is dominated by the Mother as Other [*Autre*], i.e., the primordial subject of the demand [*la demande*]. The omnipotence of which we are always speaking in psychoanalysis is first of all the omnipotence of the subject as subject of the first demand, and this omnipotence must be related back to the Mother.

The principal subject of the play is beyond all doubt Prince Hamlet. The play is the drama of an individual subjectivity, and the hero is always present on stage, more than in any other play. How is the desire of the Other manifested in the very perspective of this subject, Prince Hamlet? This desire, of the mother, is essentially manifested in the fact that, confronted on one hand with an eminent, idealized, exalted object—his father—and on the other with the degraded, despicable object Claudius, the criminal and adulterous brother, Hamlet does not choose.

His mother does not choose because of something present inside her, like an instinctive voracity. The sacrosanct genital object that we recently added to our technical vocabulary appears to her as



The end-term that buttresses this model of the subject and his question, is symbolized on our graph by the barred subject ( $\$$ ) in the presence of the object  $a$  — in the economic system of the psyche we call this the fantasy. Desire, which can be situated on the line A [ $\$ \diamond D$ ] at a variable indeterminate point, finds in the fantasy its reference, its substratum, its precise tuning in the imaginary register.

There is something mysterious about the fantasy; indeed, it's ambiguous and paradoxical. It is on one hand the end-term of desire, and on the other hand, if we approach it from one of its aspects, it's actually located in the conscious: ambiguous indeed. Insofar as the fantasy marks every human passion with those traits which we call perverse, it appears in a sufficiently paradoxical form to have long ago motivated the rejection of the phantasmatic dimension as being on the order of the absurd. In this respect an essential step was taken in the present age when psychoanalysis undertook the interpretation of the fantasy in its very perversity. This interpretation was made possible only by placing the fantasy in an economy of the unconscious — this is what you see in the graph.

On this graph the fantasy is hooked up on the circuit of the unconscious, a very different one from the circuit commanded by the subject, which I call the level of the demand [*demande*]. In the normal state of affairs, nothing from the unconscious circuit is carried over to the level of the message, of the signified of the Other, which is the sum and module of the significations acquired by the subject in human discourse. The fantasy is not communicated to the message level: it remains separate and unconscious. When, on the other hand, it does cross over to the level of the message, we find ourselves in an atypical situation. The phases in which the fantasy makes this crossover are of a more or less pathological order. We shall give a name to these moments of crossover, of communication, which, as the diagram indicates, can take place only in one direction. I underscore this essential statement, because our purpose here is to refine our understanding and application of this apparatus.

For now, let us consider only how the moment in which Hamlet's desire becomes distracted and deflected functions in Shakespeare's tragedy, insofar as this moment must be related back to the precise adjustments of his imaginary register. Ophelia's place in this constellation is on the level of the letter *a* as it appears in our representation of the fantasy. [...]

With respect to the object *a*, at once image and pathos, the subject feels himself to be in an imaginary situation of otherness. This object satisfies no need and is itself already relative, i.e., placed in relation to the subject. It is obvious from simple phenomenology (and this is something to which I shall return in a few moments) that the subject is present in the fantasy. And the object is the object of desire only by virtue of being the end-term of the fantasy. The object takes the place, I would say, of what the subject is—symbolically—deprived of.

This may seem a bit abstract to those who have not accompanied us along the road that has led up to this point. What is it that the subject is deprived of? The phallus; and it is from the phallus that the object gets its function in the fantasy, and from the phallus that desire is constituted with the fantasy as its reference.

The object of the fantasy, image and pathos, is that other element that takes the place of what the subject is symbolically deprived of. Thus the imaginary object is in a position to condense in itself the virtues or the dimension of being and to become that veritable delusion of being [*leurre de l'être*] that Simone Weil treats when she focuses on the very densest and most opaque relationship of a man to the object of his desire: the relationship of Molière's Miser to his strongbox. This is the culmination of the fetish character of the object of human desire. Indeed all objects of the human world have this character, from one angle at least. [...]

The opaque character of the object *a* in the imaginary fantasy determines it in its most pronounced forms as the pole of perverse desire. It is the structural element of perversions, insofar as perversion is characterized by the complete emphasis in the fantasy

on the strictly imaginary term, *a*. In parentheses with it we also encounter *a* plus *b* plus *c* and so forth: the most elaborate combinations of sequelae, of lingering traces combined by chance, by means of which a fantasy has crystallized and functions in a perverse desire. But however bizarre the fantasy of perverse desire may appear to you, never forget that the subject is always in some way present and involved in that fantasy. In the fantasy the subject always stands in some relationship to the pathos of existence — to the suffering of existing itself or that of existing as a term in a sexual configuration. For a sadistic fantasy to endure, the subject's interest in the person who suffers humiliation must obviously be due to the possibility of the subject's being submitted to the same humiliation himself. This is the phenomenological point to which I was alluding a few moments ago. It's a wonder indeed that people could ever think of avoiding this dimension and could treat the sadistic tendency as an instance of primal aggression pure and simple.

## 2

The time has come to articulate the true opposition between perversion and neurosis.

Perversion is indeed something articulate, interpretable, analyzable, and on precisely the same level as neurosis. In the fantasy, as I have said, an essential relationship of the subject to his being is localized and fixed. Well, whereas in the perversion, the accent is on the object *a*, the neurosis can be situated as having its accent on the other term of the fantasy, the *§*.

The fantasy is located at the extreme tip, the end-point of the subject's question, as if it were its buttress [*butée*: lit., abutment], just as the subject tries to get control of himself in the fantasy, in the space beyond the demand. This is because he must find again in the very discourse of the Other what was lost for him, the subject, the moment he entered into this discourse. What ultimately matters is not the truth but the hour [*l'heure*] of truth.

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This is what permits us to specify the factor that most profoundly distinguishes the fantasy of neurosis from the fantasy of perversion.

The fantasy of perversion is namable. It is in space. It suspends an essential relationship. It is not atemporal but rather outside of time. In neurosis, on the contrary, the very basis of the relationships of subject to object on the fantasy level, is the relationship of the subject to time. The object is charged with the significance sought in what I call the hour of truth, in which the object is always at another hour, fast or slow, early or late.

I have said before that hysteria is characterized by the function of an unsatisfied desire and obsession by the function of an impossible desire. But beyond these two terms the two cases are distinguished by inverse relationships with time: the obsessive neurotic always repeats the initial germ of his trauma, i.e., a certain precipitancy, a fundamental lack of maturation.

This is at the base of neurotic behavior, in its most general form: the subject tries to find his sense of time [*lire son heure*] in his object, and it is even in the object that he will learn to tell time [*lire l'heure*]. This is where we get back to our friend Hamlet, to whom everyone can attribute at will all the forms of neurotic behavior, as far as you want to go, i.e., up to character neurosis. The first factor that I indicated to you in Hamlet's structure was his situation of dependence with respect to the desire of the Other, the desire of his mother. Here now is the second factor that I ask you to recognize: Hamlet is constantly suspended in the time of the Other, throughout the entire story until the very end.

Do you remember one of the first turning-points we focussed on when we were beginning to decipher the text of *Hamlet*? During the play scene the king becomes unsettled and visibly reveals his own guilt, incapable of viewing the dramatization of his own crime. Hamlet relishes his triumph and mocks the king. But on the way to the meeting he has already arranged with his mother, he comes upon his stepfather in prayer: Claudius is shaken to the depths of his being by the scene that has just shown him the very coun-

tenance and program of his deed. Hamlet stands before this Claudius, who by every indication is not only in no state to defend himself but also does not even see the threat that hangs over his head. And Hamlet stops, because it's not time. It's not the hour of the Other: not time for the Other to render his "audit" to heaven. That would be too kind, from one point of view, or too cruel, from another. That might not avenge his father properly, because prayer, being a gesture of repentance, might open up the way to salvation for Claudius. In any case, one thing is sure: Hamlet, who has just managed to "catch the conscience of the king" as planned—stops. Not for a moment does he think that his time has come. Whatever may happen later, this is not the hour of the Other, and he suspends his action. Whatever Hamlet may do, he will do it only at the hour of the Other.

Hamlet accepts everything. Let's not forget that at the beginning, in the state of disgust he was already in (even before his meeting with the ghost) because of his mother's remarriage, he thought only of leaving for Wittenberg. A recent commentary on a certain practicality that is becoming more and more typical of present-day life, used this as an illustration, noting that Hamlet was the best example of the fact that many dramatic crises can be avoided by the prompt issuance of passports. If Hamlet had been given his papers to travel to Wittenberg, there would have been no drama.

When he stays on, it is the hour of his parents. When he suspends his crime, it is the hour of the others. When he leaves for England, it is the hour of his stepfather. It's the hour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he sends them on ahead to death—with a casualness that amazed Freud—by means of a bit of hocus-pocus that he brings off not half badly. And it is the hour of Ophelia, the hour of her suicide, when the tragedy will run its course, in a moment when Hamlet has just realized that it's not hard to kill a man, the time to say "one" . . . he won't know what hit him.

He receives word of an event that in no way seems to promise an opportunity to kill Claudius: a tournament, the rules of which have been worked out to the last detail. They tempt him with the

stakes—all precious objects, swords, fittings, and other things that have value only as luxuries; this should be followed in the text, for these are the nuances of the world of the collector. Hamlet's sense of rivalry and honor is aroused by the assumption that Laertes is the more skillful swordsman and by the handicap thus granted to Hamlet in the terms of the wager. This complicated ceremony is a trap for him to fall into, laid by his stepfather and his friend Laertes: we know this, but Hamlet does not. For him, going along with the wager will be a lark, like playing hookey. Still, he feels a slight warning signal in the region of his heart: something troubles him. For a moment here the dialectic of foreboding brings its special accent to the play. But, all in all, it is still at the hour of the Other, and what's more, for the sake of the Other's wager (for it is Claudius, not Hamlet, whose possessions are at stake), wearing the king's colors, for his stepfather's sake, that Hamlet enters into this supposedly friendly combat with a man considered to be a better swordsman than he. Thus Claudius and Laertes have aroused his sense of rivalry and honor as part of a trap that is calculated to be foolproof.

Thus he rushes into the trap laid by the Other. All that's changed is the energy and fire with which he rushes into it. Until the last term, until the final hour, Hamlet's hour, in which he is mortally wounded before he wounds his enemy, the tragedy follows its course and attains completion at the hour of Other: this is the absolutely essential framework for our conception of what is involved here.

This is the sense in which Hamlet's drama has the precise metaphysical resonance of the question of the modern hero. Indeed, something has changed since classical antiquity in the relationship of the hero to his fate.

As I have said, the thing that distinguishes Hamlet from Oedipus is that Hamlet *knows*. This characteristic explains, for example, Hamlet's madness. In the tragedies of antiquity, there are mad heroes, but, to the best of my knowledge, there are no

heroes—in tragedy, I say, not in legends—no heroes who feign madness. Hamlet, however, does.

I am not saying that everything in his madness comes down to feigning, but I do underscore the fact that the essential characteristic in the original legend, i.e., in the versions of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest, is that the hero feigns madness because he knows that he is in a position of weakness. And from that moment on, everything hinges on the question of what's going on in his mind.

However superficial this characteristic may seem to you, it's still the thing that Shakespeare seized on for his *Hamlet*. He chose the story of a hero who is forced to feign madness in order to follow the winding paths that lead him to the completion of his act. The person who knows is indeed in such a perilous position, marked for failure and sacrifice, that he is led to feign madness, and even, as Pascal says, to be mad along with everyone else. Feigning madness is thus one of the dimensions of what we might call the strategy of the modern hero.

Thus we arrive at the point at which Ophelia must fulfill her role. If the structure of the play is really as complex as I have just portrayed it as being, you may be wondering, what is the point of the character Ophelia? Ophelia is obviously essential. She is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet.

Some people have reproached me for the timidity with which they feel I've been proceeding. I don't think that's the case. I wouldn't want to encourage you to produce the sort of hogwash that psychoanalytic texts are full of. I'm just surprised that nobody's pointed out that Ophelia is *O phallos*, because you find other things equally gross, flagrant, extravagant, if you just open the *Papers on Hamlet*, which Ella Sharp unfortunately left unfinished and which it was perhaps a mistake to publish after her death.

Since it's getting late, I just want to stress what happens to Ophelia in the course of the play.

We first hear Ophelia spoken of as the cause of Hamlet's sad state. This is Polonius' psychoanalytic wisdom: Hamlet is sad, and

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that's because he's not happy, and if he's not happy, it's because of my daughter. You don't know her—she's the very finest there is—and I, of course, as a father, could never permit her to . . . .

We first encounter Ophelia—and this makes her quite a remarkable figure already—in the context of a clinical observation. She indeed has the good fortune to be the first person Hamlet runs into after his unsettling encounter with the ghost, and she reports his behavior in terms that are worth noting.

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 loosèd out of hell  
To speak of horrors — he comes before me.

... ..  
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,  
For out o' doors he went without their helps  
And to the last bended their light on me.

(Act II, Sc. I)

And Polonius cries out: This is love!

This distance from the object that Hamlet takes in order to move on to whatever new and henceforth difficult identification, his vacillation in the presence of what has been until now the object of supreme exaltation, gives us the first stage, which is, to use the English word, one of “estrangement.”

That's all we can say. Nevertheless, I don't believe that it's

excessive to designate this moment as pathological, related to those periods of irruption, of subjective disorganization which occur when something in the fantasy wavers and makes the components of the fantasy appear. This experience, called depersonalization, in the course of which the imaginary limits between subject and object change, leads us to what is called in the strict sense the fantastic dimension [*le fantastique*].

This dimension arises when something from the imaginary structure of the fantasy is placed in communication with something that normally reaches the level of the message, i.e., the image of the other subject, in the case in which that image is my own ego. Moreover, some authors like Federn note with great precision the necessary correlation between the feeling of the subject's own body and the strangeness of that which arises in a certain crisis, a certain rupture, when the object as such is attained.

I may have forced things here a bit for the purpose of interesting you by showing you how this episode is related to certain types of clinical experience. But I assure you that without reference to this pathological schema it is impossible to locate what Freud was the first to elevate to the level of analysis under the name of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, which is linked not, as some believed, to all sorts of irruptions from the unconscious, but rather to an imbalance that arises in the fantasy when it decomposes, crossing the limits originally assigned to it, and rejoins the image of the other subject.

In the case of Hamlet, Ophelia is after this episode completely null and dissolved as a love object. "I did love you once," Hamlet says. Henceforth his relations with Ophelia will be carried on in that sarcastic style of cruel aggression which makes these scenes—and particularly the scene that occupies the middle of the play—the strangest in all of classical literature.

In this attitude we find a trace of what I mentioned a moment ago, the perverse imbalance of the fantasmatic relationship, when the fantasy is tipped toward the object. Hamlet no longer treats Ophelia like a woman at all. She becomes in his eyes the childbearer

to every sin, a future “breeder of sinners,” destined to succumb to every calumny. She is no longer the reference-point for a life that Hamlet condemns in its essence. In short, what is taking place here is the destruction and loss of the object. For the subject the object appears, if I may put it this way, on the outside. The subject is no longer the object: he rejects it with all the force of his being and will not find it again until he sacrifices himself. It is in this sense that the object is here the equivalent of, assumes the place of, indeed is—the phallus.

This is the second stage in the relationship of the subject to the object. Ophelia is at this point the phallus, exteriorized and rejected by the subject as a symbol signifying life.

What is the indication of this? There’s no need to resort to the etymology of “Ophelia.” Hamlet speaks constantly of one thing: child-bearing. “Conception is a blessing,” he tells Polonius, but keep an eye on your daughter. And all of his dialogue with Ophelia is directed at woman conceived as the bearer of that vital swelling that he curses and wishes dried up forever. The use of the word “nunnery” in Shakespeare’s time indicates that it can also refer to a brothel. And isn’t the relationship of the phallus and the object of desire also indicated in Hamlet’s attitude during the play scene? In Ophelia’s presence he says of her to his mother, “Here’s metal more attractive,” and wants to place his head between the girl’s legs: “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?”

Considering the great interest of iconographers in the subject, I don’t think it excessive to note that the list of flowers in the midst of which Ophelia drowns herself, explicitly includes “dead men’s fingers.” The plant in question is the *Orchis mascula*, which is related to the mandrake and hence to the phallic element. You’ll find “dead men’s fingers” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, both under “finger” and in an entry of its own under “D,” where Shakespeare’s allusion is duly cited.

The third stage, to which I have already directed your attention several times, is the graveyard scene, in the course of which Hamlet is finally presented with the possibility of winding things up, of

rushing to his fate. The whole scene is directed toward that furious battle at the bottom of the tomb, which I have stressed repeatedly, and which is entirely of Shakespeare's own invention. Here we see something like a reintegration of the object *a*, won back here at the price of mourning and death.

I should be able to finish up next time.

(15 April 1959)

### *Desire and Mourning*

Thus, for Hamlet, the appointment is always too early, and he postpones it. Procrastination is thus one of the essential dimensions of the tragedy.

When, on the contrary, he does act, it is always too soon. When does he act? When all of a sudden something in the realm of events, beyond him and his deciding, calls out to him and seems to offer him some sort of ambiguous opening, which has, in specific psycho-analytical terms, introduced the perspective we call flight [*fuite*] into the dimension of accomplishment.

Nothing could be clearer on this score than the moment in which Hamlet rushes at whatever it is moving behind the arras and kills Polonius. Or think of him awakening in the dead of night on the storm-tossed ship, going about almost in a daze, breaking the seals of the message borne by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, substituting almost automatically one message for another, and duplicating the royal seal with his father's ring. He then has the amazing good luck to be carried off by pirates, which enables him to ditch his guards, who will go off unwittingly to their own execution.

We recognize here a phenomenology that is familiar to us from our experience and our conceptions: the phenomenology of the neurotic and his relation to his life. But I have sought to lead you beyond these characteristics, however striking they may be.

I wanted to open your eyes to one structural trait that is present throughout the play: Hamlet is always at the hour of the Other.

That, of course, is just a mirage, because, as I've said, there's no such thing as an Other of the Other [*il n'y a pas d'Autre de l'Autre*].<sup>2</sup> In the signifier there is nothing that guarantees the dimension of truth founded by the signifier. For Hamlet there is no hour but his own. Moreover, there is only one hour, the hour of his destruction. The entire tragedy of *Hamlet* is constituted in the way it shows us the unrelenting movement of the subject toward that hour.

Yet the subject's appointment with the hour of his destruction is the common lot of everyone, meaningful in the destiny of every individual. Without some distinguishing sign, Hamlet's fate would not be of such great importance to us. That's the next question: what is the specificity of Hamlet's fate? What makes it so extraordinarily problematic?

What does Hamlet lack? Can we, on the basis of the plan of the tragedy, as composed by Shakespeare, pin down and spell out this lack in a way that goes beyond all the approximations that we have a way of permitting ourselves and that produce the general fuzziness not only of our terminology but also of how we act with our patients and of the suggestions we make to them?

Nevertheless, let's start with an approximation. You can say in simple, everyday terms what Hamlet lacks: he's never set a goal

<sup>2</sup> This often repeated Lacanian formula helps to distinguish the Other (capitalized) from the other (lower case) in Lacan's own discourse and from earlier uses of the terms by other authors. The Lacanian Other is in no way the complement or the negation of the subject, nor itself essentially a subject. Although the subject may take actual persons, beginning with the father, as incarnations of the Other, the Other functions only in the symbolic register, only in the context of language, authority, law, transgression, and sanction. All this makes it impossible for the Other to have an Other of its own. — Tr.

for himself, an object—a choice that always has something “arbitrary” about it.

To put it in commonsensical terms, Hamlet just doesn't know what he wants. This aspect is brought out in the speech that Shakespeare has him pronounce at one of the turning-points in the drama, the moment when he drops out of sight, the brief interval when he goes away on this nautical excursion from which he will return most rapidly. He has no sooner left for England, still obedient, in compliance with the king's orders, than he encounters the troops of Fortinbras, who has been present from the beginning in the background of the tragedy and who at the end will come to gather the dead, to tidy up, to restore order. In this scene our friend Hamlet is struck by the sight of these courageous troops going off to conquer a few acres of Polish soil for the sake of some more or less pointless military pretext. This gives Hamlet pause to consider his own behavior.

How all occasions do inform against me  
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,  
 If his chief good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.  
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,

—the expression that is glossed “reason” is “large discourse,” fundamental discourse, what I have referred to in other seminars as “concrete discourse”—

... such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after...

—now here's where the word “reason” comes in—

... gave us not  
 That capability and godlike reason  
 To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be  
 Bestial oblivion...

—“bestial oblivion,” one of the key-words by which to measure Hamlet's existence in the tragedy—

... or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on th' event—  
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward — I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me.  
Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,  
Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honor's at the stake. How stand I then,  
That have a father killed, a mother stained,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

(Act IV, Sc. IV)

Such is Hamlet's meditation on the object of human action. This object leaves the door wide open to us for all of what I shall call the particularizations that we shall consider. That is true dedication—shedding one's blood for a noble cause, for honor. Honor, too, is portrayed correctly: being totally committed by one's word. As for the gift, we as analysts cannot overlook this concrete determination, cannot help being struck by its weight, be it in flesh or in commitment.

What I'm trying to show you here is not merely the common form of all this, the least common denominator: it's not a question of formalism. When I write the formula  $\$ \diamond a$  at the end of the question that the subject, in search of his last word, asks in

the Other, this is not something that is actually open to investigation, except in that special experience which we call psychoanalytic experience and which makes possible the exploration of the unconscious circuit running along the upper track of the graph.

What we're concerned with is the short circuit in the imaginary register between desire and that which is across from it, i.e., the fantasy. I express the general structure of the fantasy by  $\$ \diamond a$ , where  $\$$  is a certain relationship of the subject to the signifier—it is the subject as irreducibly affected by the signifier—and where  $\diamond$  indicates the subject's relationship to an essentially imaginary juncture [*conjoncture*], designated by  $a$ , not the object of desire but the object *in* desire.

Let's try to get some notion of this function of the object in desire. The drama of Hamlet makes it possible for us to arrive at an exemplary articulation of this function, and this is why we have such a persistent interest in the structure of Shakespeare's play.

This is our starting point: through his relationship to the signifier, the subject is deprived of something of himself, of his very life, which has assumed the value of that which binds him to the signifier. The phallus is our term for the signifier of his alienation in signification. When the subject is deprived of this signifier, a particular object becomes for him an object of desire. This is the meaning of  $\$ \diamond a$ .

The object of desire is essentially different from the object of any need [*besoin*]. Something becomes an object in desire when it takes the place of what by its very nature remains concealed from the subject: that self-sacrifice, that pound of flesh which is mortgaged [*engagé*] in his relationship to the signifier.

This is profoundly enigmatic, for it is ultimately a relationship to something secret and hidden. If you'll permit me to use one of those formulas which come to me as I write my notes, human life could be defined as a calculus in which zero was irrational. This formula is just an image, a mathematical metaphor. When I say "irrational," I'm referring not to some unfathomable emotional state

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but precisely to what is called an imaginary number. The square root of minus one doesn't correspond to anything that is subject to our intuition, anything real—in the mathematical sense of the term—and yet, it must be conserved, along with its full function. It's the same with that hidden element of living reference, the subject, insofar as, taking on the function of signifier, he cannot be subjectified as such.

The notation  $\$$  expresses the necessity that  $S$  be eclipsed at the precise point where the object  $a$  attains its greatest value. This is precisely why we can grasp the true function of the object only by surveying its various possible relationships to this element. It would be excessive, perhaps, if I were to say that the tragedy of Hamlet took us over the entire range of those functions of the object. But it definitely does enable us to go much further than anyone has ever gone by any route.

2

Let's start with the ending, the meeting place, the hour of the appointment.

The final act, in which Hamlet finally puts the full weight of his life on the line, as the price for being able to accomplish his action—this act that he activates and undergoes, has something in it of the moment at the end of the hunt when everyone moves in for the kill. At the moment when his act reaches completion, he is also the deer brought to bay by Diana. A plot has been hatched out between Claudius and Laertes with incredible audacity and malice, whatever the reasons of each, and with the assistance of that loathsome insect, the ridiculous toady who comes to Hamlet to propose the tournament, that plot now closes around him.

This is the structure—extraordinarily simple. The tournament puts Hamlet in the position of being the one who, in the wager, takes up the side of Claudius, his uncle and stepfather. He thus wears another man's colors.

The tournament involves, rightly, certain stakes. In the dialogue between Hamlet and the man who comes to tell him of the conditions of the contest, nothing is spared to dazzle you with the quality, number, and array of the objects wagered. Hamlet bets Laertes six Barbary horses, against which Laertes stakes “six French rapiers and poniards,” a complete outfitting for duelists, along with “hangers”—the scabbards, I suppose. Three have what the text calls “most delicate carriages,” an especially elegant expression to refer to the loops from which the sword hangs. It’s the sort of word a collector would use, and the same as the word for the support of a cannon.

These precious objects, gathered together in all their splendor, are staked against death. This is what gives their presentation the character of what is called a *vanitas* in the religious tradition. This is how all objects are presented, all the stakes in the world of human desire — the objects *a*.

I have indicated the paradoxical and even absurd nature of the tournament that is proposed to Hamlet. Yet he seems just to lie down and roll over, one more time, as if there were nothing in him to stand in the way of his being constantly and fundamentally at somebody else’s beck and call: “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 gentleman willing, and the king hold his purpose, I will win for him an I can; if not, I will gain nothing but my shame and the odd hits” (Act V, Sc. II).

This is something that shows us the very nature of the fantasy. At the moment in which Hamlet is on the point of resolution—finally, as ever, on the verge of resolution—there he is, hiring himself out to someone else, and, what’s more, getting nothing in return, doing it all for free, even though the other person is precisely his enemy, the man that he must defeat. He stakes his resolution against the things that interest him least in the world, and he does this in order to win for someone else.

The others think they can charm Hamlet with these objects, these collector’s items, and they are doubtless wrong. Still, they are

making an effective appeal to what does interest him. He is interested for the sake of honor—what Hegel calls the fight for pure prestige<sup>3</sup>—interested for the sake of honor in a contest that pits him against a rival whom he moreover admires. We cannot help pausing for a moment to consider the soundness of the connection advanced by Shakespeare, in which you will recognize the dialectic of what is already a long-familiar moment in our dialogue, the mirror stage.

What is expressly articulated in the text—indirectly, it is true, i.e., within a parody—is that at this point Laertes is for Hamlet his double [*semblable*]. When Osric, the tedious courtier who brings the proposal of the duel, speaks to Hamlet of his adversary, depicting the eminence of the man to whom he will have to show his mettle, Hamlet cuts him off: “Sir, his definement suffers no perdition in you, though, I know, to divide him inventorially would dozy th’ arithmetic of memory, and yet but yaw neither in respect of his quick sail” (Act V, Sc. II). He delivers an extremely precious, flowery speech, parodying the style of the man he’s addressing. He concludes: “I take him to be a soul of great article, and his infusion of such dearth and rareness as, to make true diction of him, his semblable is his mirror, and who else would trace him, his umbrage, nothing more.”

The image of the other, as you see, is presented here as completely absorbing the beholder. The particular value of this passage, inflated with its Gongoristic conceits, is that this is Hamlet’s attitude towards Laertes before the duel. The playwright situates the basis of aggressivity in this paroxysm of absorption in the imaginary register, formally expressed as a mirror relationship, a mirrored reaction. The one you fight is the one you admire the most. The ego ideal is also, according to Hegel’s formula which says that coexistence is impossible, the one you have to kill.

<sup>3</sup> “*Lutte de pur prestige.*” See the presentation of section B, IV, A of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 11-34, esp. 18, 22, 24. — Tr.

Hamlet responds to this necessity only on a disinterested level, that of the tournament. He commits himself in what we might call a formal, or even a fictive way. He is, in truth, entering the most serious of games, without knowing it. In that game he will lose his life—in spite of himself. He is going out—again, without knowing it—to meet his act and his death, which, but for an interval of a few moments, will coincide.

Everything that he saw in the aggressive relationship was only sham, a mirage. What does that mean? It means that he has entered into the game without, shall we say, his phallus. This is one way of expressing the particularity of Hamlet as subject in the play.

He does enter into the game, nevertheless. The foils are blunted only in his deluded vision. In reality there is at least one that isn't, that has been marked to be given to Laertes when the weapons are handed out: it has a real point and, what's more, is poisoned.

The off-handedness of a screenwriter is here coupled with what we might call the formidable intuition of the playwright. Shakespeare doesn't actually bother to explain how the poisoned weapon gets from the hand of one of the duelists into that of the other—this must be one of the difficulties in playing the scene. In their scuffle after Laertes scores the hit from which Hamlet will die, the point changes hands. No one bothers to explain such an amazing incident, and no one needs to. Because the important thing is to show that Hamlet can receive the instrument of death only from the other, and that it is located outside the realm of what can actually be represented on the stage. The drama of the fulfillment of Hamlet's desire is played out beyond the pomp of the tournament, beyond his rivalry with that more handsome double, the version of himself that he can love. In that realm beyond, there is the phallus. Ultimately the encounter with the other serves only to enable Hamlet to identify himself with the fatal signifier.

The funny thing is, it's there in the text. There's talk of foils as they are being handed out: "Give them the foils, young Osric. Cousin Hamlet, / You know the wager?" Earlier Hamlet himself says, "Give us the foils." Between these two moments, Hamlet

makes a play on words: "I'll be your foil, Laertes. In mine ignorance/ Your skill shall, like a star i' th' darkest night,/ Stick fiery off indeed" (Act V, Sc. II). The French translator does what he can: "*Laerte, mon fleuret [fencing foil] ne sera que fleurette [little flower] auprès du vôtre.*" But the word "foil" here clearly does not mean a fencing foil; the word has a meaning—indeed, a fairly common one—that we can trace back to its specific occurrences in Shakespeare's day: "foil" is the same word as the Old French *feuille*, used preciously to designate a container for something precious, i.e., a jewel case. Thus the passage means: I shall be there solely to set off your stellar brilliance against the blackness of the sky. These are the very conditions of the duel: the odds are set at 12 to 9, i.e., Hamlet is given a handicap. But why the pun on "foil"? It's no accident that it's there in the text.

One of Hamlet's functions is to engage in constant punning, word play, double-entendre—to play on ambiguity. Note that Shakespeare gives an essential role in his plays to those characters that are called fools, court jesters whose position allows them to uncover the most hidden motives, the character traits that cannot be discussed frankly without violating the norms of proper conduct. It's not a matter of mere impudence and insults. What they say proceeds basically by way of ambiguity, of metaphor, puns, conceits, mannered speech—those substitutions of signifiers whose essential function I have been stressing. Those substitutions lend Shakespeare's theater a style, a color, that is the basis of its psychological dimension. Well, Hamlet, in a certain sense, must be considered one of these clowns. The fact that he is a particularly disturbing character should not keep us from realizing that his is the tragedy that brings about this fool's, this punster's annihilation. Without this dimension, as someone has pointed out, more than eighty per cent of the play would disappear.

This constant ambiguity is one of the dimensions in which Hamlet's tension is achieved, a tension that is concealed by the masquerade-like side of things. For Claudius, the usurper, the essential thing is to unmask Hamlet's intentions, to find out why

he is feigning madness. Still, we must not neglect the *way* in which Hamlet feigns madness, his way of plucking ideas out of the air, opportunities for punning equivocation, to dazzle his enemies with the brilliance of an inspired moment—all of which give his speech an almost maniacal quality.

The others then start to build on this themselves, even to tell tales. What strikes them in what Hamlet says is not its discordance but on the contrary its special pertinence. It is in this playfulness, which is not merely a play of disguises but the play of signifiers in the dimension of meaning, that the very spirit of the play resides.

Everything that Hamlet says, and at the same time the reactions of those around him, constitute as many problems in which the audience is constantly losing its bearings. This is the source of the scope and import of the play.

I remind you of all this to convince you that there is nothing arbitrary or excessive about allowing this last little pun on the word “foil” all its force. Hamlet’s pun touches the immediate question [*Hamlet fait jeu de mots avec ce qui est alors en jeu*]: the distribution of the weapons. He says to Laertes, “I’ll be your foil.” And, sure enough, what will appear a moment later but the very foil that wounds him mortally and that also will permit him to complete his circuit and to kill both his opponent and the king, the final object of his mission. In this pun there lies ultimately an identification with the mortal phallus.

Here then is the constellation in which the final act is situated. The duel between Hamlet and his more handsome double is on the lower level of our graph, *i(a)—m*. Here the man for whom every man or woman is merely a wavering, reeking ghost of a living being, finds a rival his own size. The presence of this customized double will permit him, at least for a moment, to hold up his end of the human wager: in that moment, he, too, will be a man. But this customizing job is only a result, not the beginning: it is the consequence of the immanent presence of the phallus, which will be able to appear only with the disappearance of the subject himself. The



There's a proverbial element here which I think derives all its force from analogies that some of you are capable of drawing—I cannot go into them here.

Later, speaking with Horatio, Hamlet will explain that he couldn't stand to watch Laertes make such a spectacle of his mourning. This brings us to the heart of something that will open up an entire problematic.

What is the connection between mourning and the constitution of the object in desire? Let's go at the question by way of what is most obvious to us, which will perhaps seem the most remote from the center of what we're seeking here.

Hamlet has acted scornfully and cruelly toward Ophelia, and then some. I have already stressed the demeaning aggression and the humiliation that he constantly imposes on her, once she has become for him the very symbol of the rejection of his desire. Then, suddenly, the object regains its immediacy and its worth for him:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
Could not with all their quantity of love  
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?

(Act V, Sc. I)

These are the terms in which he begins his challenge to Laertes. Here, too, is a characteristic that presents Hamlet's structure in a different form and completes it: only insofar as the object of Hamlet's desire has become an impossible object can it become once more the object of his desire.

In the desires of obsessional neurotics we have already encountered the impossible as object of desire. But let's not be too easily satisfied with these overly obvious appearances. The very structure at the basis of desire always lends a note of impossibility to the object of human desire. What characterizes the obsessional neurotic in particular is that he emphasizes the confrontation with this impossibility. In other words, he sets everything up so that the object of his desire becomes the signifier of this impossibility.

But something even deeper demands our attention.

Freudian formulations have already taught us to formulate mourning in terms of an object-relationship. Indeed, is it not striking that it was Freud who first stressed the object of mourning, after all those years in which psychologists had lived and thought?

The object of mourning derives its importance for us from a certain identification relationship that Freud attempted to define most precisely with the term "incorporation." Let's see if we can rearticulate the identification that takes place in mourning, in the vocabulary that we've learned to use in our work so far.

If we pursue this route, armed with our symbolical apparatus, we will gain perspectives on the function of mourning that I believe to be new and eminently suggestive, perspectives to which you would otherwise have no access. The question of what identification is must be elucidated by those categories which I have set forth in these seminars over the years, i.e., the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

What is the incorporation of the lost object? What does the work of mourning consist in? We're left up in the air, which explains the surcease of all speculation along the path that Freud nevertheless opened up in "Mourning and Melancholia." The question hasn't been posed properly.

Let's stay with the most obvious aspects of the experience of mourning. The subject who descends into the maelstrom of sorrow finds himself in a certain relationship to the object which is illustrated most clearly in the graveyard scene: Laertes leaps into the grave and embraces the object whose loss is the cause of his desire, an object that has attained an existence that is all the more absolute because it no longer corresponds to anything in reality. The one unbearable dimension of possible human experience is not the experience of one's own death, which no one has, but the experience of the death of another.

Where is the gap, the hole that results from this loss and that calls forth mourning on the part of the subject? It is a hole in the real, by means of which the subject enters into a relationship that

is the inverse of what I have set forth in earlier seminars under the name of *Verwerfung* [repudiation, foreclosure].

Just as what is rejected from the symbolic register reappears in the real, in the same way the hole in the real that results from loss, sets the signifier in motion. This hole provides the place for the projection of the missing signifier, which is essential to the structure of the Other. This is the signifier whose absence leaves the Other incapable of responding to your question, the signifier that can be purchased only with your own flesh and your own blood, the signifier that is essentially the veiled phallus.

It is there that this signifier finds its place. Yet at the same time it cannot find it, for it can be articulated only at the level of the Other. It is at this point that, as in psychosis—this is where mourning and psychosis are related—that swarms of images, from which the phenomena of mourning arise, assume the place of the phallus: not only the phenomena in which each individual instance of madness manifests itself, but also those which attest to one or another of the most remarkable collective madneses of the community of men, one example of which is brought to the fore in *Hamlet*, i.e., the ghost, that image which can catch the soul of one and all unawares when someone's departure from this life has not been accompanied by the rites that it calls for.

What are these rites, really, by which we fulfill our obligation to what is called the memory of the dead—if not the total mass intervention, from the heights of heaven to the depths of hell, of the entire play of the symbolic register. [. . .]

Indeed, there is nothing of significance that can fill that hole in the real, except the totality of the signifier. The work of mourning is accomplished at the level of the *logos*: I say *logos* rather than group or community, although group and community, being organized culturally, are its mainstays. The work of mourning is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of 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.

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This explains the belief we find in folklore in the very close association of the lack, skipping, or refusal of something in the satisfaction of the dead, with the appearance of ghosts and specters in the gap left by the omission of the significant rite.

Here we see a new dimension in the tragedy of *Hamlet*: it is a tragedy of the underworld. The ghost arises from an inexpiable offense. From this perspective, Ophelia appears as a victim offered in expiation of that primordial offense. The same holds for the murder of Polonius and the ridiculous dragging around of his body by the feet.

Hamlet then suddenly cuts loose and mocks everyone, proposing a series of riddles in particularly bad taste which culminates in the expression "Hide fox, and all after," a reference to a sort of game of hide-and-seek. Hamlet's hiding of this body in defiance of the concerned feelings of everyone around him, is here just another mockery of that which is of central importance: insufficient mourning.

Next time we shall have to spell out the connection between the fantasy and something that seems paradoxically distant from it, i.e., the object-relationship, at least insofar as mourning permits us to shed some light on this connection. The ins and outs of the play *Hamlet* will enable us to get a better grasp of the economy—very closely connected here—of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. [...]

(22 April 1959)

### *Phallophany*

The tragedy *Hamlet* is the tragedy of desire. But as we come to the end of our trajectory it is time to notice what one always takes note of last, i.e., what is most obvious. I know of no commentator who has ever taken the trouble to make this remark, however hard it is to overlook once it has been formulated: from one end of *Hamlet* to the other, all anyone talks about is mourning.

Mourning is what makes the marriage of Hamlet's mother so scandalous. In her eagerness to know the cause of her beloved son's "distemper," she herself says: "I doubt it is no other but the main,/ His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage." And there's no need to remind you of what Hamlet says about the leftovers from "the funeral baked meats" turning up on "the marriage tables": "Thrift, thrift, Horatio."

This term is a fitting reminder that in the accommodations worked out by modern society between use values and exchange values there is perhaps something that has been overlooked in the Marxian analysis of economy, the dominant one for the thought of our time—something whose force and extent we feel at every moment: ritual values. Even though we note them constantly in our experience, it may be useful to give them special consideration here as essential factors in human economy.

I have already alluded to the function of ritual in mourning. Ritual introduces some mediation of the gap [*béance*] opened up by mourning. More precisely, ritual operates in such a way as to make this gap coincide with that greater *béance*, the point *x*, the symbolic lack. The navel of the dream, to which Freud refers at one point, is perhaps nothing but the psychological counterpart of this lack.

Nor can we fail to be struck by the fact that in all the instances of mourning in *Hamlet*, one element is always present: the rites have been cut short and performed in secret.

For political reasons, Polonius is buried secretly, without ceremony, posthaste. And you remember the whole business of Ophelia's burial. There is the discussion of how it is that Ophelia, having most probably committed suicide—this is at least the common belief—still is buried on Christian ground. The gravediggers have no doubt that if she had not been of such high social standing she would have been treated differently. Nor is the priest in favor of giving her Christian burial ("She should in ground unsanctified have lodged/Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers,/ Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her" [Act V, Sc. I]), and

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the rites to which he has consented are themselves abbreviated.

We cannot fail to take all these things into account, and there are many others as well.

The ghost of Hamlet's father has an inexpiable grievance. He was, he says, eternally wronged, having been taken unawares—and this is not one of the lesser mysteries as to the meaning of this tragedy—"in the blossoms of [his] sin." He had no time before his death to summon up the composure or whatever that would have prepared him to go before the throne of judgment.

Here we have a number of "clues," as they say in English, which converge in a most significant way—and where do they point? To the relationship of the drama of desire to mourning and its demands.

This is the point that I would like to focus on today, in an attempt to delve into the question of the object such as we encounter it in psychoanalysis—the object of desire.

## 1

There is first of all a simple relationship that the subject has to the object of desire, a relationship that I have expressed in terms of an appointment. But you will not have failed to notice that we are approaching the question of the object from quite a different angle when we speak of the object such as the subject identifies himself with it in mourning—the subject, it is said, can reintegrate the object into his ego. What does that mean? Aren't we dealing here with two phases which are not reconciled in psychoanalytic theory? Doesn't this call for an attempt to get deeper into the problem?

What I have just said about mourning in *Hamlet* must not obscure the fact that at the bottom of this mourning, in *Hamlet* as in *Oedipus*, there is a crime. Up to a certain point, the whole rapid succession, one instance of mourning after another, can be seen as consequences of the initial crime. It is in this sense that *Hamlet* is an Oedipal drama, one that we can read as a second

*Oedipus Rex* and locate at the same functional level in the genealogy of tragedy. This is also what put Freud, and his disciples after him, onto the importance of *Hamlet*.

Indeed, the psychoanalytic tradition sees in Oedipus' crime the quintessential charting of the relationship of the subject to what we call here the Other, i.e., to the locus of the inscription of the law. This same tradition places Hamlet at the center of its consideration of the problem of origins. This is a good point at which to recall certain essential details of how the relationship of the subject to the original crime has been articulated for us up till now.

Instead of taking the usual course of leaving things in a state of fuzzy confusion, which doesn't make theoretical speculation any easier, we must make distinctions. There are two stages.

The first is that of the crime, perfectly illustrated by *Totem and Taboo*, which deserves to be called the Freudian myth. We can even say that Freud's construction may well be the sole example of a full-fledged myth to have emerged in our historical age. This myth shows us an essential connection: the order of the law can be conceived only on the basis of something more primordial, a crime. This is also the meaning for Freud of the Oedipal myth.

For Freud, the primal murder of the father forms the ultimate horizon of the problem of origins. Note, too, that he finds it relevant for every psychoanalytic issue, and he never considers a discussion closed until it is brought in. This primal patricide, which he places at the origin of the horde and at the origin of the Judaic tradition, clearly has a mythic character.

The connection between the law and the crime is one thing. Another is what develops from this connection when the tragic hero—both Oedipus and each one of us potentially at some point of our being, when we repeat the Oedipal drama—renews the law on the level of tragedy, and, in a sort of baptism, guarantees its rebirth. This is the second stage.

The tragedy of Oedipus satisfies perfectly the definition I have just given of myth as ritual reproduction. Oedipus, who is actually completely innocent, unconscious and unaware, manages without

realizing it—in a sort of dream that is his life (life is a dream)—to renew the channels of access from crime to the restoration of order. He takes on the punishment himself and at the end seems to us to be castrated.

This is the element that remains hidden if we restrict ourselves to the first stage, that of the primal murder. Indeed, the most important thing is punishment, sanction, castration—the hidden key to the humanization of sexuality, the key with which we are accustomed by our experience to make the accidents of the evolution of desire fall into place.

It is not without interest to take note of the dissymmetries between the tragedy of Oedipus and the tragedy of Hamlet. It would be too elaborate an exercise to list them in detail, but I shall nevertheless give you a few indications.

In *Oedipus*, the crime takes place at the level of the hero's own generation; in *Hamlet*, it has already taken place at the level of the preceding generation. In *Oedipus*, the hero, not knowing what he's doing, is in some way guided by fate; in *Hamlet*, the crime is carried out deliberately.

The crime in *Hamlet* is the result of betrayal. Hamlet's father is taken by surprise in his sleep, in a way that is utterly foreign to the current of his waking thoughts. "I was cut off," he says, "even in the blossoms of my sin." He is struck by a blow from a sector from which he does not expect it, a true intrusion of the real, a break in the thread of destiny. He dies, as Shakespeare's text tells us, on a bed of flowers, which the play-scene will go so far as to reproduce in the opening pantomime.

The sudden intrusion of the crime is somehow, paradoxically, compensated for by the fact that in this case the subject *knows*. This is not one of the less puzzling aspects of the play. The drama of Hamlet, unlike that of Oedipus, does not start off with the question "What's going on?," "Where is the crime?," "Where is the criminal?" It begins with the denunciation of the crime, with the crime as it is brought to light in the ear of the subject. We can express the ambiguity of this revelation in the form used in our

algebra for the message of the unconscious, i.e., the signifier of barred A [ $S(\mathcal{A})$ ].

In the normal form, if we can put it that way, of the Oedipal situation, the  $S(\mathcal{A})$  is embodied by the Father, since he is the expected source of the sanction from the locus of the Other, the truth about truth. 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.

The situation at the beginning of *Hamlet* is completely different, even though it can be represented by the same notation. The Other reveals himself from the beginning as the barred Other. He is barred not only from the world of the living but also from his just retribution. He has entered the kingdom of hell with this crime, this debt that he has not been able to pay, an inexpiable debt, he says. And indeed, this is for his son the most frightening implication of his revelation.

Oedipus paid. He represents the man whose heroic lot is to carry the burden of requited debt. On the contrary, Hamlet's father must complain for all eternity that he was interrupted, taken by surprise, cut off in midstream—that to him the possibility of response, of retribution, is forever sealed off.

You see that our investigation, as it moves along, leads us to ask questions about retribution and punishment, i.e., about what is involved in the signifier phallus in castration.

Freud himself indicated, perhaps in a somewhat *fin de siècle* way, that for some reason when we lived out the Oedipal drama, it was destined to be in a warped form, and there's surely an echo of that in *Hamlet*.

Consider one of Hamlet's first exclamations at the end of the first act: "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!" "O cursèd . . ."—the word "spite," which appears throughout Shakespeare's sonnets, can only be translated "*dépit*," grudge, vexation—"he did it out of pure spite." But let's be careful here. To understand the Elizabethans one must first turn

certain words around on their hinges so as to give them a meaning somewhere between the subjective one and the objective one. Today the word "spite"—as in "he did it out of pure spite"—has a subjective meaning, whereas in "O cursèd spite" it's somewhere in between, between the experience of the subject and the injustice in the world. We seem to have lost the sense of this reference to the world order. "O cursèd spite" is what Hamlet feels spiteful toward and also the way that the time is unjust to him. Perhaps you recognize here in passing, transcended by Shakespeare's vocabulary, the delusion of the *schöne Seele*,<sup>4</sup> from which we have not escaped, far from it, all our efforts notwithstanding. When I referred to the sonnets just now, it was not purely gratuitous. So—I translate: "*O malédiction, que je ne sois né jamais pour le remettre droit.*"

This justifies and deepens our understanding of *Hamlet* as possibly illustrating a decadent form of the Oedipal situation, its decline. This is the same word that we find in Freud's expression, *der Untergang des Ödipus-Komplexes*, the decline or dissolution of the Oedipus complex—in the life of each individual, he means. This is the title he gives to one of his texts, not a long one, which I'd like to bring to your attention now. You'll find it in Volume XII of the *Gesammelte Werke* [Standard Edition, XIX, 173-79].

2

Thus in 1924 Freud himself calls attention to what is ultimately the puzzle of the Oedipus complex. It's not simply that the subject wanted, desired to kill his father and to violate his mother, but that that is in the unconscious.

<sup>4</sup> Allusion to Hegel's dialectic of the withdrawn, contemplative "beautiful soul" (*Phenomenology of Mind*, tr. Baillie [New York: Harper & Row, 1967], pp. 663-67, 675-76, 795), generally considered itself an allusion in turn to a variety of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers, primarily in Germany. In several other contexts, Lacan links this dialectic to others in the *Phenomenology* ("master-slave," "law of the heart") and stresses that the beautiful soul denounces the perceived disorder of the world around him without recognizing that this disorder is a reflection of his own inner state. See *Écrits*, pp. 171-73, 281, 292, 415.—Tr.

How does that come to be in the unconscious? How does it come to reside there so that the subject, during an important period of his life, the latency period, which is the source of the construction of his entire world, is no longer concerned by the Oedipal situation at all—to such an extent that Freud could admit, at least at the beginning of his treatment of the issue, that in an ideal case this lack of concern is a happy, definitive resolution of the whole business?

Let's begin with what Freud tells us; then we'll see whether it's grist for our mill.

When does the Oedipus complex, according to Freud, go into its *Untergang*, that decisive event for all of the subject's subsequent development? When the subject feels the threat of castration, and feels it from both directions implied by the Oedipal triangle. If he wants to take his mother's place, the same thing will happen—remember that he is aware of the fact that woman is castrated, this perception marking the completion and maturity of the Oedipus complex. Thus, with regard to the phallus, the subject is caught in an impossible dilemma with no avenue of escape.

Thus the phallus is this thing that is presented by Freud as the key to the *Untergang* of the Oedipus complex. I say "thing" and not "object," because it is a real thing, one that has not yet been made a symbol, but that has the potential of becoming one.

Freud's presentation of the problem puts the female child in a situation that is not at all dissymmetrical with that of the male. With respect to this thing, the subject enters into a relationship that we may call one of lassitude—the word is in Freud's text—where gratification is concerned. As for the boy, he decides he's just not up to it. And as for the girl, she gives up any expectation of gratification in this way—the renunciation is expressed even more clearly in her case than in his. All we can say is expressed in a formulation that doesn't come out in Freud's text but whose pertinence is everywhere indicated: the Oedipus complex goes into its decline insofar as the subject must mourn the phallus.

This serves to illuminate the later function of this moment of desire. The scraps and fragments of the Oedipus complex, more or less incompletely repressed, emerge in puberty in the form of neurotic symptoms. But that's not all. It is the common experience of analysts that the genital normalization of the subject,<sup>5</sup> not only in the economy of his unconscious but also in the economy of his imaginary register, depends on the decline of the Oedipus complex. If the process of genital maturation is to turn out well, the Oedipus complex must be terminated as completely as possible, for the consequence of this complex in both man and woman is the scar, the emotional stigma, of the castration complex. We may be able to shed some light on the decline of the Oedipus complex as mourning for the phallus if we refer to what Freud's writings tell us about the mechanism of mourning. There's a synthesis to be made here.

What defines the limits of the objects for which we may have to mourn? This, too, has not been worked out yet. We can certainly imagine that the phallus is not just one more object to be mourned like all the others. Here, as everywhere else, it has a place of its own, a place apart. This place is what we want to determine, to determine against a background. Then the place of the background itself will become apparent as a result.

Here we're on completely new ground, where we encounter what I call the question of the place of the object in desire. This is the question that I have been exploring [*que je labore*] with you by means of a series of concentric strokes; I put various stresses on it to give it various resonances, and our analysis of *Hamlet* should help us to pursue it further.

What gives the phallus its particular value? Freud replies, as always, without the slightest precaution—he bowls us over, and thank God he did it till the day he died, for otherwise he never could have finished what he still had to lay out [*tracer*] in his field

<sup>5</sup> See the article "Stade (ou Organisation) génital(e)" in Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967). — Tr.

of work—Freud replies that it's a narcissistic demand [*exigence*] made by the subject.

At the moment of the final outcome of his Oedipal demands, the subject, seeing himself castrated in any case, deprived of the thing, prefers, as it were, to abandon a part of himself, which will henceforth be forever forbidden to him, forming the punctuated chain of signifiers that forms the top of our diagram. If the love relationship that is caught up in the parental dialectic recedes, if the subject permits the Oedipal relationship to founder, it is because—says Freud—of the phallus, of that phallus that is introduced so enigmatically from the beginning of the narcissistic stage on.

What does that mean to us, in terms of our vocabulary?

There's no point in referring back to all of this unless it permits us to shed some light on what Freud must leave out. He leaves it out because he needs to get to the heart of the matter and doesn't have time to dwell on his assumptions. This is moreover the way that all action, generally speaking, is founded, especially all true action, which the action that concerns us here should be.

Well, in terms of our discourse, "narcissistic" has something to do with the imaginary register. Let's start by saying that the subject must explore [*faire le tour de*] his relationship to the field of the Other, i.e., the field organized in the symbolic register, in which his demand for love has begun to express itself. It is when he emerges from this exploration, having carried it to the end, that the loss of the phallus occurs for him and is felt as such, a radical loss. How does he respond then to the necessity [*exigence*] of this mourning? Precisely with the composition of his imaginary register and with nothing else—a phenomenon whose similarity to a psychotic mechanism I have already indicated. [...]

The position of the phallus is always veiled. It appears only in sudden manifestations [*dans des phanies*], in a flash, by means of its reflection on the level of the object. For the subject, of course, it's a question of to have it or not to have it. But the radical position of the subject at the level of privation, of the subject as

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subject of desire, is not to be it. The subject is himself, so to speak, a negative object.

We can say that the forms in which the subject appears at the levels of castration, of frustration, and of privation, are forms of alienation, but we must provide for each of the three a characterization that distinguishes it perceptibly from the others. At the level of castration, the subject appears in a blackout [*syncope*] of the signifier. It's something else when he appears at the level of the Other, in a state of submission to the law of one and all. It's something else again when he himself must situate himself in desire. The form of his disappearance has in this case a singular originality, well suited to prompt us to formulate it further on.

This is indeed the direction in which the course of the tragedy *Hamlet* is taking us.

### 3

Indeed, the “something rotten” with which poor Hamlet is confronted is most closely connected with the position of the subject with regard to the phallus. And the phallus is everywhere present in the disorder in which we find Hamlet each time he approaches one of the crucial moments of his action.

There's something very strange in the way Hamlet speaks about his dead father, an exaltation and idealization of his dead father which comes down to something like this: Hamlet has no voice with which to say whatever he may have to say about him. He actually chokes up and finally concludes by saying—in a particular form of the signifier that is called “pregnant” in English, referring to something that has a meaning beyond its meaning—that he can find nothing to say about his father except that he was like anyone else. What he means is very obviously the opposite. This is the first indication, the first trace, of what I want to talk about here.

Another trace is that the rejection, deprecation, contempt that he casts on Claudius has every appearance of *dénégation*.<sup>6</sup> The torrent of insults that he unleashes on Claudius—in the presence of his mother, namely—culminates in the phrase “a king of shreds and patches.” We surely cannot fail to relate this to the fact that, in the tragedy of Hamlet, unlike that of Oedipus, after the murder of the father, the phallus is still there. It’s there indeed, and it is precisely Claudius who is called upon to embody it.

Claudius’ real phallus is always somewhere in the picture. What does Hamlet have to reproach his mother for, after all, if not for having filled herself with it? And with dejected arm and speech he sends her back to that fatal, fateful object, here real indeed, around which the play revolves.

For this woman—who doesn’t seem to us so very different from other women, and who shows considerable human feelings—there must be something very strong that attaches her to her partner. And doesn’t it seem that that is the point around which Hamlet’s action turns and lingers? His astounded spirit, so to speak, trembles before something that is utterly unexpected: the phallus is located here in a position that is entirely out of place in terms of its position in the Oedipus complex. Here, the phallus to be struck at is real indeed. And Hamlet always stops. The very source of what makes Hamlet’s arm waver at every moment, is the narcissistic connection that Freud tells us about in his text on the decline of the Oedipus complex: one cannot strike the phallus, because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a *ghost*.

We were troubled at the time by the question of why, after all, no one assassinated Hitler—Hitler, who is very much this object that is not like the others, this object  $x$  whose function in the homogenization of the crowd by means of identification is de-

<sup>6</sup> Lacan’s translation of Freud’s term *Verneinung*, usually translated in English as “negation.” Its use here suggests that Hamlet’s hostile references to Claudius can be interpreted as indications of repressed admiration. See Freud’s 1925 essay, “Negation” (*Standard Edition*, XIX, 235-39), and the corresponding article in Laplanche and Pontalis.—Tr.

monstrated by Freud. Doesn't this lead back to what we're discussing here?

The question at hand is the enigmatic manifestation of the signifier of power, of potency: the Oedipal situation, when it appears in the particularly striking form in the real that we have in *Hamlet*, with the criminal, the usurper, in place and functioning as usurper. What stays Hamlet's arm? It's not fear—he has nothing but contempt for the guy—it's because he knows that he must strike something other than what's there. Indeed, two minutes later, when he arrives at his mother's chamber and is beginning to give her all holy hell, he hears a noise behind the curtain, and he lunges out without looking first.

I don't recall now what astute commentator pointed out that Hamlet cannot possibly believe that it's Claudius, because he's just left him in the next room. Nevertheless, when he has disemboweled poor Polonius, he remarks: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool.../ I took thee for thy better." Everyone thinks that he meant to kill the king, but in the presence of Claudius, the real king and the usurper as well, he did after all hold back: he wanted something or someone better, wanted to cut him off, too, in the blossoms of his sin. Claudius, as he knelt there before him, wasn't quite what Hamlet was after—he wasn't the right one.

It's a question of the phallus, and that's why he will never be able to strike it, until the moment when he has made the complete sacrifice—without wanting to, moreover—of all narcissistic attachments, i.e., when he is mortally wounded and knows it. The thing is strange and obvious, recorded in all sorts of little riddles in Hamlet's style.

Polonius for him is merely a "calf," one that he has in some sense sacrificed to the spirit of his father. When he's stashed him under the stairs and everyone asks him what's going on, he goes into a few of his jokes, which are always so disconcerting for his adversaries. Everyone wonders whether what he says is really what he means, because what says gets them all where they're the touch-

iest. But for him to say it, he must know so much that they can't believe it, and so on and so forth.

This is a position that must be quite familiar to us from the phenomenon of the avowal made by the subject. He speaks these words which up till now have remained as good as sealed to the commentators: "The body is with the king"—he doesn't use the word "corpse," please notice—"but the king is not with the body." Replace the word "king" with the word "phallus," and you'll see that that's exactly the point—the body is bound up [*engagé*] in this matter of the phallus—and how—but the phallus, on the contrary, is bound to nothing: it always slips through your fingers. [...]

Hamlet: The king is a thing —  
Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?  
Hamlet: Of nothing.

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