

Jacques Lacan

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

Jacques Lacan

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

Jacques Lacan

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(~~A~~)].

In the normal form, if we can put it that way, of the Oedipal situation, the S(~~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

Jacques Lacan

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.



Jacques Lacan

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 laboure*] 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

Jacques Lacan

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.

Jacques Lacan

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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