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The Loss of the Symbolic Father: A Lacanian Inquiry into Subjectivity and Structural Disintegration in *Hamlet*

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Abstract

This research paper offers a re-evaluation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, moving beyond traditional Freudian Oedipal readings toward a sophisticated Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. It argues that Hamlet's psychological crisis is fundamentally not a reaction to the physical loss of his father, but a traumatic encounter with the collapse of the "Symbolic Order" – what Jacques Lacan terms *le nom-du-père* (the Name of the Father). By applying structuralist and post-structuralist critiques, this study examines how the disintegration of this structure leaves the subject, Hamlet, in a state of "ontological void," where language, agency, and social binary oppositions lose their stability. Through a rigorous analysis of Hamlet's soliloquies and his existential fragmentation, this paper demonstrates how the loss of the Symbolic Father serves as a catalyst for the protagonist's transition from a coherent, structured subject to a fragmented "Other".

Keywords: Hamlet; Lacanian Psychoanalysis; Symbolic Order; Name of the Father (*Nom-du-Père*); Subjectivity; Ontological Void.

Introduction

The Loss of the Symbolic Father: The traditional critical apparatus surrounding Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has long been dominated by Freudian Oedipal readings, which, while foundational, often reduce the protagonist's predicament to a mere familial dysfunction (Jones 78). This study proposes a paradigm shift, re-evaluating the tragedy through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It contends that Hamlet's psychological disintegration is not an isolated symptom of mourning, but a traumatic encounter with the structural collapse of the Symbolic Order – or what Jacques Lacan designated as the Name of the Father (*le nom-du-père*). This collapse signifies the dissolution of the foundational signifiers of law, authority, and reality that anchor the subject's existence.

Crucially, this disintegration precipitates an acute state of Lacanian melancholia, wherein Hamlet becomes irrevocably fixated on a lost object-cause of desire. He finds himself suspended in an ontological void, unable to reconcile the "Ideal Father" (the Law) with the "Real" horror of the regicide. This melancholic fixation is further exacerbated by the material betrayal within the court; the

usurpation of the throne by Claudius functions as the ultimate commodification of power, where kinship is rendered transactional. When Gertrude transfers her libidinal allegiance to the usurper, the last vestiges of Hamlet's symbolic structure are annihilated.

Consequently, Hamlet is cast into a state of radical alienation, transitioning from a coherent structured subject into a fragmented "Other." Through a rigorous examination of his soliloquies, this paper demonstrates that his descent into madness is not a failure of character but an inevitable psychological trajectory in a world where the Symbolic Father has been rendered obsolete, leaving the subject adrift in a landscape of total existential and moral dissolution.

Beyond the Oedipal: The Structural Collapse of the Symbolic

Traditional Hamlet scholarship, largely anchored by Ernest Jones's influential Freudian reading, characterizes the protagonist's hesitation as a manifestation of unresolved Oedipal desire, suggesting that Hamlet's paralysis is rooted in his "repressed" feelings toward Gertrude (Jones 78). However, this reductive focus on carnal desire fails to account for the catastrophic structural disintegration of the Elsinore Court. As Jacques Lacan argues in his seminal seminars on Hamlet, the protagonist's crisis is not essentially biological; it is a traumatic encounter with the "Real" precipitated by the collapse of the Symbolic Order (Lacan 14). While Freudians perceive a mere familial dysfunction, a Lacanian lens reveals that Hamlet's world loses its coherence because the "Name of the Father" – the ultimate signifier of law and reality – has been violently erased.

The intensity of Hamlet's lament, "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" (Shakespeare 1.2.129), serves as the textual site where the subject's ontological collapse is most palpable. The "solid flesh" is not merely the King's body; it is the embodiment of the Symbolic structure that governed the state. As Terry Eagleton notes, the tragedy lies in the friction between archaic feudal loyalties and the emergent, opportunistic materialism of the era (Eagleton 64). When Claudius usurps the throne, he does not merely replace a man; he initiates a systemic commodification of power, replacing ancestral duty with transactional gain.

The Disintegration of Relational Signifiers

Hamlet's psychological disintegration is not merely a solitary internal struggle; it is externalized through his volatile rejection of the feminine, specifically in his strained interactions with Gertrude and Ophelia. When Hamlet declares, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2.146), he is not simply indulging in misogyny; he is articulating the collapse of his faith in the symbolic structures of kinship. As Catherine Belsey argues, the subject is constructed within a social and linguistic framework; when this framework – the Name of the Father – is compromised, the subject's ability to maintain coherence in relations is shattered (Belsey 129).

For Hamlet, the mother traditionally represents a pillar of stability within the social order, but she becomes a signifier of betrayal, causing him to perceive the moral foundation of reality as corrupt. This erosion of trust is further manifest in his treatment of Ophelia; despite his earlier declaration of love – asserting he loved her "more than forty thousand brothers" (Shakespeare 5.1.263-64) – his subsequent command to "get thee to a nunnery" (Shakespeare 3.1.121) signals a total abandonment of social norms. Lacan posits that the "Symbolic Order" relies on stable relationships to maintain meaning; by shattering these bonds, Hamlet descends into a void where intimacy is rendered impossible (Lacan 18). Consequently, his aggression towards the women in his life acts as a projection of his own existential fragmentation – unable to reconcile his ideal of duty with the reality of Elsinore's corruption, he systematically destroys the objects of his affection, mirroring the ruin of his own internal landscape.

The Architecture of Greed: Materialism and the Rupture

The insatiable pursuit of power exhibited by Claudius cannot be dismissed as a mere aberration of individual character; rather, it functions as an archetypal manifestation of the "collective

unconscious," a primordial instinct that has historically governed human governance (Jung 52). This desire for sovereignty transcends the individual, reflecting a recurring, destructive impulse to dominate that finds its specific resonance in the early capitalist transition. As the socio-economic landscape shifted from feudal allegiance to a transactional materialist ethos, the sanctity of kingship was effectively commodified. As Terry Eagleton rightly observes, this period witnessed the emergence of a "cynical pragmatism," wherein political power was no longer rooted in divine right, but in the material acquisition of influence (Eagleton 68).

This pivot toward raw materialism precipitated the catastrophic collapse of the "Elizabethan Chain of Being." As E.M.W. Tillyard argues, this metaphysical hierarchy was essential to the Renaissance worldview, as it ensured cosmic and social equilibrium by linking the monarch directly to the divine order (Tillyard 30). Hamlet's existential despair is a direct confrontation with this entropic collapse. He perceives that the state has become an "unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / possess it merely" (Shakespeare 1.2.135-37). By murdering his brother and assuming the throne, Claudius systematically dismantled the ontological tether between the sovereign and the cosmic law.

Hamlet's internal fragmentation stems from the harrowing realization: "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (Shakespeare 1.5.188-89). By prioritizing self-interest over state integrity, Claudius severed the connection between the sovereign and the divine, validating the Elizabethan fear that the death of the monarch signals the end of objective meaning. Thus, the chaos that descends upon Elsinore is the logical conclusion of a system where the "Name-of-the-Father" has been superseded by the cold, entropic mechanism of material greed.

Furthermore, within the Elizabethan age, the rigidity of the patriarchal structure necessitated the total subordination of women. Gertrude and Ophelia embody this systemic marginalization. Gertrude's rapid remarriage and Ophelia's tragic dissolution serve as reflections of an Elizabethan society that commodified female bodies to ensure the stability of the patriarchal lineage. When the cosmic order fractures under Claudius's greed, it is these women who are most violently impacted, as they lack the structural power to survive the ensuing collapse of the symbolic frameworks that governed their existence.

The Political Economy of Marital Union: Gertrude and Claudius

The marriage between Gertrude and Claudius represents far more than a mere interpersonal union; it serves as a calculated departure from personal affect, functioning as a desperate, artificial attempt to fill the void left by the "symbolic father". In the context of Early Modern state-building, marriage was frequently leveraged as a mechanism to stabilize political authority. However, within the Elsinore court, this union functions as a tool of statecraft designed to legitimize a precarious usurpation.

From a Marxist perspective, as analyzed by Eagleton, Claudius's decision to marry the widow of the man he murdered is not an expression of love, but a strategic maneuver to manufacture a "clean state" (Eagleton 64). By quickly securing Gertrude's hand, Claudius attempts to manipulate public perception, seeking sympathy and projecting an image of benevolence to mask the regicide. This performative strategy extends to his treatment of Hamlet; by publicly adopting Hamlet as his son, Claudius constructs an artificial reality, feigning fatherly concern to create a façade of normalcy intended to subdue a potentially rebellious court (Newman 76).

Historically, this pattern of "political marriage" transcends the specific confines of Elizabethan England. Across global civilizations, marriage was rarely a ceremony for the mere consummation of libidinal desire; rather, it was a fundamental instrument for the expansion of provinces and the consolidation of sovereign power. In this global political economy, the marriage contract functioned to solidify alliances and secure territorial integrity, often at the expense of individual agency. Such unions

exemplify the commodification of kinship, where matrimonial bonds are rendered transactional to ensure the continuity of governance.

From a feminist critique, the body of the Queen functions as a contested site where political legitimacy is enacted. As Karen Newman argues, Claudius views Gertrude not as a partner, but as an indispensable political asset (Newman 76). Her role is to provide the required façade to normalize his illicit power. Hamlet's intense disgust at the "o'erhasty marriage" is, therefore, not merely a reaction to his mother's perceived infidelities, but a profound recognition of this cynical political maneuvering (Shakespeare 1.2.156). He perceives that the marriage serves as a "signifier" for the commodification of the throne—a union where personal morality is sacrificed at the altar of political expediency.

Ultimately, the marriage becomes an emblem of the very rot that Hamlet identifies: the transformation of kinship into a transactional commodity where the feminine body is utilized solely as a conduit for the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony. By reducing the Queen to a symbol of state stability, Claudius effectively erases her subjectivity, turning her into a mere object in the machinery of the state (Newman 76). This structural exploitation highlights the vulnerability of the female subject within the patriarchal power dynamics of the Renaissance period, where the alignment of the female body with the state's political interests serves as a primary mode of social regulation. Thus, the marriage is not merely a subplot, but a pivotal element of the tragic structure that underscores the collapse of the moral and political order in Elsinore. Through this lens, Gertrude's victimization is absolute, as her life is subsumed by the cold, materialist ambitions of a usurper who views the entirety of the court as an extension of his own insatiable desire for power (Eagleton 68).

The Fragmentation of the Subject: The Lacanian Rupture and Ophelian Dissolution

The collapse of the symbolic order within the microcosm of Elsinore finds its most cataclysmic manifestation in the figure of Ophelia, whose subjectivity is systematically obliterated by the oppressive patriarchal machinations of the court. As a subject constituted within the Lacanian symbolic order, Ophelia's identity is precariously anchored in the "Name-of-the-Father"—a position occupied by Polonius, whose surveillance dictates the contours of her existence. Her initial docility, evidenced in her submissive articulation, "I shall obey, my lord," reveals a subject who has internalized the law of the father to such a pervasive degree that she possesses no ontological status outside of that rigid structure (Shakespeare 1.3.136). As Jacques Lacan posits, the subject is not a monolithic entity but a construct of the "Big Other," and in Ophelia's case, her reality is entirely predicated upon the validation of male authority, rendering her psychic autonomy non-existent.

The intersection of feminist and Lacanian critique illuminates the profound depth of her trauma. Feminist scholar Elaine Showalter contends that Ophelia is a "pawn in a masculine game of power," perpetually silenced by both the court's predatory gaze and Hamlet's erratic, misogynistic performativity (Showalter 78). From a strictly Lacanian perspective, when Hamlet enacts the regicidal-adjacent murder of Polonius, he does not merely commit a crime; he destroys the "symbolic anchor" that maintains the coherence of Ophelia's reality. According to Lacan's theory of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, the destruction of the father figure creates an unbridgeable rift, forcing the subject to confront the "Real"—that chaotic, unspeakable, and terrifying void that persists when the protective fabric of the symbolic structure collapses (Lacan 118).

This ontological fragmentation is further intensified by the visceral violence of the "Nunnery Scene." Hamlet's command, "Get thee to a nunnery," acts as a form of symbolic castration, forcing Ophelia to confront her own objectification under the burden of his projection (Shakespeare 3.1.121). Hamlet no longer views her as a human subject capable of interiority; rather, she is reduced to an objet petit a—a mirror reflecting his own profound disgust toward his mother's sexuality and the instability of the court (Evans 142). As she descends into madness, her speech ceases to adhere to the coherent patriarchal syntax of the court, instead adopting the fragmented, nonsensical language of the "Real."

As she sings, "He is dead and gone, lady," she abandons the teleological structure of discourse, embracing the chaotic fluidity of madness as a desperate, semiotic attempt to reconstruct her shattered identity (Shakespeare 4.5.29-30).

Ophelia's subsequent suicide, therefore, must be interpreted not merely as an act of insanity, but as a final, desperate reclamation of her own corporeality. By choosing the water as her medium of dissolution, she performs the ultimate act of defiance against a patriarchal structure that demanded her silence and total submission. Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection" provides a crucial lens here: Ophelia's broken body represents the "abject" – that which has been cast out by the symbolic order yet remains a haunting presence (Kristeva 4). Her death marks the absolute rupture of the cosmic order in Elsinore; it is the point at which the subject, unable to inhabit the contradictions of the masculine symbolic, chooses to exit the system entirely, leaving behind only the "faint, broken echoes" of a humanity destroyed by political expediency (Shakespeare 4.5.42-43). Thus, her descent is not a failure of character, but a radical indictment of the very structures that sought to contain her, echoing the warning that "we know what we are, but know not what we may be," a chilling reminder of the inherent instability of the human condition (Shakespeare 4.5.42-43).

Conclusion

The tragedy of Hamlet serves as a catastrophic meditation on the disintegration of the human subject within a landscape where the foundational "Name-of-the-Father" has been irrevocably erased. Through a Lacanian lens, this crisis is not merely a manifestation of familial dysfunction or personal neurosis, but a profound collapse of the ontological tether that links the individual to the cosmic and social order. As Jacques Lacan suggests, the protagonist's trauma is a direct, unmediated encounter with the "Real" – that unspeakable, chaotic void that emerges when language and traditional signifiers of authority lose their coherence, leaving the subject in a state of suspended animation.

Hamlet's journey, characterized by the existential predicament of a "fragmented Other," mirrors the radical alienation of an individual cast into a world of cold, entropic materialism. This rupture of ancestral loyalties and the dismantling of the "Elizabethan Chain of Being" leaves no character unscathed, forcing each into a performance of identity that lacks an internal moral anchor. Hamlet remains paralyzed by his inability to reconcile his ideal of duty with the reality of profound systemic corruption, while Gertrude is forced into a silence of complicity to preserve a fragile state continuity, and Ophelia is reduced to a casualty of a patriarchal structure that renders her identity obsolete when the symbolic framework fractures.

Ultimately, the play acts as a haunting testament to the fragility of reality itself when truth is sacrificed at the altar of transactional power. Moving beyond reductive Freudian readings, one uncovers a more disturbing truth: the tragic collapse of Elsinore is a timeless archetype of the systemic loss of a moral anchor in an age of emerging cynicism. The transformation of the sovereign from a sacred figurehead to a political commodity hollows out the "Symbolic," leaving behind only an "Imaginary" realm of mirrors, deceit, and performative anxiety. In this environment, the subject is not merely lost; they are fundamentally unmade, stripped of the signifiers that once rendered them legible to themselves and others.

Hamlet's final words, "the rest is silence," function not merely as a narrative closure, but as a profound acknowledgement that in a world where symbolic structures have dissolved, silence is the only remaining legacy of a subject who has finally and irrevocably come undone. This silence serves as an ontological signature of the subject's liberation from the oppressive, defunct Law of the Father, even as it signals the total annihilation of the self. By foregrounding this silence, Shakespeare anticipates the existentialist anxiety of later centuries, placing the resolution of Hamlet at the epicenter of our understanding of the modern, alienated condition. The tragedy, therefore, lies not merely in the death

of the prince, but in the death of the possibility of meaning itself in an entropic, post-Symbolic universe, where the void becomes the only absolute truth.

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