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‘A place where three roads meet’:
Sophocles’s *Oedipus* and Shakespeare’s
Hamlet after Freud

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Declaration

I hereby confirm that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university. Neither this thesis nor any of its component sections have been published or currently considered for publication.

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Summary

The dissertation presents a detailed investigation of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the context of Freud's comparison of the plays, sketched out in a number of his early writings (most notably *The Interpretation of Dreams*) but never pursued at length either by him or by any later critics. The interest of the current investigation is not inspired simply by the absence of such a detailed comparison, on the one hand, and by its constant implication in the modern analysis of the plays in question, on the other. The particular inspiration for the current project is the work of Jean Laplanche that in the last forty years has been dedicated to a fundamental re-conceptualisation of Freud's theory of the human subject by way of return to the questions of the seduction and otherness. Equally inspiring for the current project have been the recent developments in the non-psychoanalytic analyses of tragedy (ancient Greek, Elizabethan, and as genre as such) that consistently aspire to cross the boundaries of the traditional textual-historicist approach to the literary text in order to accommodate the particularly heterogeneous nature of their object of study.

Thus, the current project provides a comprehensive analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, successively, at the intersection of psychoanalytic and other (philological and philosophical) approaches to tragedy, paying attention not only to the texts of the tragedies themselves but to the narrative-mythological, dramatic, and, in the case of Sophocles, translational tradition to which they pertain. The relevance of Freudian categories to the texts and genre in question is thus thoroughly examined. As a result, the conclusion is reached that it is specifically through Laplanchean re-

conceptualisation of Freud's notion of seduction (and the related notions of the enigmatic message, the other, translation and transference) that a psychoanalytic approach becomes more amenable to the needs of literary analysis. The application of Laplanchean categories to the analysis of these tragedies helps to elucidate the role of the father with new precision (in comparison with the previous mother-centred approaches to these tragedies). In its main body, the dissertation consists of a general Introduction, analytical sections on Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Conclusion, and the list of the consulted works.

1. Introduction

'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 all in detail, but I will nevertheless give you a few indications'. (Lacan, 'Desire' 43)

An extended engagement with either Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is hard to justify. Neither play has suffered from lack of attention since its first presentation (on stage and in print) which, in each case, was also the result of a greater and far more ancient popularity of the title character.

It should seem equally superfluous to attempt a combined treatment of the two plays in the context of modern scholarship heavily influenced, as it has been, by the work of Sigmund Freud, who came up with the most influential comparison of the two plays. However, if a researcher first ties the title characters of the plays to the respective playwrights and then each pair to each other, the relevant bibliography sharply diminishes.¹ The irony of this situation is deepened by the fact (epitomised in the epigraph) that even in the psychoanalytically informed criticism a combined detailed analysis of these plays is yet to be undertaken. How could this be possible?

There is no single answer to this question since it relates to an enormous field of cultural production. However, the chief factor that has contributed to this status quo is certainly the problem of interdisciplinary correspondence between the roles of these plays in psychoanalysis and literary criticism.

In psychoanalysis, they enjoy the privilege of having been called on to illustrate the discipline-forming shift from the theory of seduction to infantile sexuality; at the

¹ Regular recent checks with the MLA electronic catalogue revealed 4079 entries for 'Hamlet' and 681 for 'Oedipus'; 3749 for 'Shakespeare Hamlet', 361 for 'Shakespeare's Hamlet', 179 for 'Sophocles(/s) Oedipus'; 25 for 'Oedipus and Hamlet' and 8 for 'Shakespeare Hamlet and Sophocles Oedipus'.

same time their psychoanalytic comparison subordinates them to a heterogeneous theoretical paradigm which heavily restricts the scope of analytical engagement. Freud's fullest combined treatment of the plays in *The Interpretation of Dreams* has long been a subject of critique (often together with the initial sketch of the comparison from the letter to Fliess of October 15, 1897). Sophocles' play is presented there as a revelation, as if in 'the work of a psycho-analysis', of the unconscious wishes for patricide and incest 'forced upon us by Nature': 'King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes' (363, 365, 364).² Shakespeare's play, which 'has its roots in the same' instinctual 'soil', represents a neurotic locked into a hopeless struggle with these wishes, brought about by 'the secular advance of repression' (366). Unlike *Oedipus*, where Freud sees the identity of the wishing subject cunningly delayed until the very end, Hamlet comes onstage already tormented by their incarnation in the figure of Claudius newly married to Hamlet's mother. The Ghost's story only intensifies this torment by supplying the image of the incestuous marriage with the scene of fratri-, and from Hamlet's point of view, patri-cide. Hamlet's identification with Claudius' twin crimes is, in Freud's opinion, Oedipal in nature; it is the key to Hamlet's delay and the tragedy's baffling effect.³ However problematic such a reading may have seemed since its first publication in 1900, Jean Starobinski in his 1972 'Hamlet and Oedipus', expressly elaborating on the example of Ernest Jones, lucidly defended its validity precisely on the

² The corresponding passage in the letter to Fliess reads: 'the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence in himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfilment here transplanted into reality' (Masson 272).

³ 'How does Hamlet the hysteric justify his words, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all?"...How better than through the torment he suffers from the obscure memory that he himself had contemplated the same deed against his father out of passion for his mother...' (Masson 273).

grounds of its purpose to illustrate a scientific theory. It is true that the impact of this theory on the plays themselves results in the notion that

Oedipus has no unconscious because he *is* our unconscious...He does not need any depth of his own because he is our depth...To attribute a psychology to him would be foolish: he is already an instantiation of psychology. Far from being a possible object of psychological study, he has become a functional element in the creation of a psychological science...In modern terms, Oedipus is instinct or, rather, its figurative counterpart. (156, 160, italics original)

It is also true that although Starobinski grants Hamlet a 'three-dimensional' psychological interiority, as opposed to Oedipus' 'opaque, residueless plenitude of a psychic image' (160), this interiority is practically exhausted, in Freud's reading, by this 'opaque' image.⁴ Nevertheless, provided that Freud's psychological theory of 'instinct' is accepted, the comparative reading must remain valid within the limits of its specialist agenda. After all, Freud himself clearly acknowledges these limits in the closing remarks on the plays in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

...just as all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams, are capable of being 'over-interpreted' and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation. In what I have written I have only attempted to interpret the deepest layer of impulses in the mind of the creative writer. (368, quotation marks original)

In literary criticism, a comprehensive comparison between these two and other tragedies in general has not fared much better because of similar disciplinary considerations. After the initial enthusiasm of the 'grand debate between the ancients and the moderns in the late seventeenth-century France', which saw many contemporary English critics engage

⁴ The opposition between Oedipus as a depthless character and Hamlet as the one endowed with psychological interiority is certainly reminiscent of John Jones' 1968 study *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*.

in comparisons of *Hamlet* with classical masterpieces, such an approach to tragedy became increasingly problematic: 'As with the French *Querelle*, the debate [in England] leads towards the recognition that the same standard cannot be applied to works so disparate in time' (Grazia, 'Hamlet' 489). And although the comparison remained implicit in the next stage of the debate where (notably with Coleridge) it was no longer 'a matter of determining superiority' but 'of defining difference' (489), the analyses became more restricted to a single historical context. Just as Freud's psychoanalysis purported to concentrate on the 'Nature' of the unconscious with no possibility of accommodating a fully developed philology, so did literary criticism come to focus on the specificity of character and, later, language in a given drama and thus a given historical period.

The apogee of this focus, expressed in a conscious opposition to Freudian comparativism, was elaborated by Starobinski's contemporary Jean-Pierre Vernant in the series of essays included in his and Pierre Vidal-Nacquet's 1972 *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (translated into English in 1988). Particularly in 'Oedipus without the Complex', Vernant insists that '...the meaning present within the work...must be painstakingly reconstructed through a study at every level of the message that a legendary tale or a tragic fiction constitutes' (86). From his point of view, the Freudian approach is inadequate to the study of the literary text because its 'point of departure is an intimate experience undergone by the public, which is historically unlocated' and which then is 'projected onto the work in question regardless of its own sociocultural context' (87). Such an approach, according to Vernant's curiously ambiguous phrasing, 'has *all the semblance of the rigor of an argument* based on a vicious circle' (87, italics

added).⁵ Vernant's own alternative is 'historical psychology' that postulates the possibility of arrival at an understanding of the audience's 'intimate experience' only after, not before, the painstaking 'linguistic, thematic, dramatic' analysis of the tragedy in question (87). Accordingly, this understanding purports to be very different from Freud's because it concerns itself with binding of subjectivity to historical structures rather than its universal essence.

Despite this tendency in the studies of tragedy towards historically specific structuralism, cross-period comparisons certainly continued to exist after the peak of the 'grand debate between the ancients and the moderns'. They tended towards aesthetic/philosophical approaches based, as it was in Freud's case, on a larger and non-literary theoretical framework. However, even within this domain, there was no precedent for an exclusive comparison between Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* before Freud. It was more habitual for the seventeenth and eighteenth-century English critics to compare Hamlet with Orestes than Oedipus.⁶ This is still partly true of Hegel's *The Philosophy of Fine Art* (1835), Freud's closest outstanding precedent in the theoretical appropriations of tragedy, which readily juxtaposes Hamlet with Orestes when it comes to discuss the tragic conflict arising 'from a *spiritual* violation of spiritual forces through human action' and its dramatic consequences:

⁵ What Vernant appears to mean is certainly that Freud's argument has only 'semblance of the rigor' because in fact it is based on a 'vicious circle'. However, the phrase can equally imply the opposite: i.e. that the 'vicious circle' is only a 'semblance'.

⁶ Nicholas Rowe in the first eighteenth-century edition of Shakespeare (1709) announces that '*Hamlet* is founded upon much the same Tale with the *Electra* of Sophocles' (qtd. in Grazia, 'Hamlet' 489). Other critics who followed the suit of this comparison included Charles Gildon (*Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare* (1710)), Jean-Bernard Le Blanc (*Letters on the English and French Nations* (1747)), John Upton (*Critical Observations on Shakespeare* (1748)), William Richardson (*A Philosophical Analysis* (1774)), Georges Stubbes (*Some Remarks on the 'The Tragedy of Hamlet'* reproduced in the 1790 edition of *Hamlet* by Malone) (qtd. in Grazia, *Hamlet* 489, n.38-39). Freud's contemporary Gilbert Murray published his *Hamlet and Orestes* as late as 1914. The most recent case for privileging Hamlet-Orestes parallel has been made by Louise Schleiner in 'Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare's Writing of "Hamlet"' (1990).

Agamemnon...sacrifices Iphigenia, and so violates the feeling of her mother...Clytemnestra, in consequence, murders her spouse. Orestes avenges the murder of his father and king by assassinating his mother. In a similar way in "Hamlet" the father is sent to his grave by a stratagem, and the mother of Hamlet insults the *manes* of the dead man by a precipitate marriage with his murderer. (Paolucci and Paolucci 125)

However, earlier, in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel does add Oedipus to this pairing in the illustration of the constitutive division of consciousness into 'knowledge' and '*not* knowledge':

The present reality, therefore, is one thing in itself, and another for consciousness....The one [undivided spiritual substance] is the aspect of light, the god of the Oracle, who as regards its natural aspect [Light] has sprung from the all-illuminating Sun, knows all and reveals all, Phoebus and Zeus, who is his Father. But the commands of this truth-speaking god, and his proclamations of what *is*, are really deceptive and fallacious. For this knowledge is, in its very principle, directly *not* knowledge, because consciousness in acting is inherently this opposition. He [Oedipus], who had the power to unlock the riddle of the sphinx, and he [Orestes] too who trusted with childlike confidence, are, therefore, both sent to destruction through what the god reveals to them...There is a type of consciousness that is purer...and more sober, more thorough, and more solid...This type of consciousness...lets his revenge tarry for the revelation which the spirit of his father makes regarding the crime that did him to death, and institutes other proofs in addition – for the reason that the spirit giving the revelation might possibly be the devil. (Paolucci and Paolucci 294-95, italics original)

There is an obvious similarity between Hegel's and Freud's use of tragedy as a schematic illustration of theory: where the former uses the Greek and Elizabethan protagonists to articulate the development of 'Spirit' through the successive types of consciousness, the latter is tracing the evolution of 'Nature' and its repression in the 'emotional life of mankind'.

Thus there appears to be no possibility of combining various approaches to tragedy because, while they may be similar in structure, each of them – psychoanalytic,

philosophical, philological – is pursuing its own specific interests. This is true in spite of the obvious fact that in the years after Freud there developed a significant psychoanalytic literary scholarship. Starobinski's dictum on Oedipus – 'Far from being a possible object of psychological study, he has become a functional element in the creation of a psychological science' – has hardly been challenged. Rudnytsky's *Freud and Oedipus* (1987), remaining the only book-long engagement with the topic of Oedipus, is much more interested in tracing pre-Freudian philosophical appropriation of the character than in the complexities of Sophocles' text. In the context of this interest, Oedipus' identity as the prototype of self-knowledge and ultimately the subject of the paradigmatic unconscious wishes is not disputed. Instead, it is made to look more credible through the attention to the apparent fact that in his treatment of the plot Sophocles, unlike Aeschylus and Euripides, has 'suppressed any [external] explanatory principle' leading to these wishes – such as the curse under which Aeschylus' Oedipus falls due to Laius' abduction and rape of Chrysippus (Rudnytsky 255). Thus what Rudnytsky sees as Sophocles' dismissal of Laius' 'escapades' leads him directly to Freud's designation of Oedipus as the tragic subject of the deepest '*self-knowledge*' rather than a victim of '*symbolic paternal seduction*' (225, italics original).

In an exemplary and again virtually the only book-long psychoanalytic literary study of *Hamlet*, Avi Erlich does forcefully question the schematic application of the Oedipus complex but only in relation to Shakespeare's play.⁷ In an almost Vernantian

⁷ *Hamlet's Absent Father* (1977). Unlike this study, Kurt Eissler's *Discourse on Hamlet and Hamlet* (1971), despite having 'called attention to the importance of father figures in *Hamlet* and thus brought a welcome break from the Freud-Jones emphasis on Claudius' (Erlich 25), remains more orthodoxly Freudian with regard to the question of the Oedipus complex itself. Walter N. King's *Hamlet's Search for Meaning* (1982) broadens the discussion of Hamlet's identification into the area of Erikson's ego-psychology and Frankl's logotherapy thus veering away from the specificity of Freudian reading.

refusal to accept the Freudian reading of it as an unquestionable 'point of departure and the key to the decipherment' (Vernant 88), Erlich performs a painstaking textual analysis of the play and the main psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic contemporary readings of it to prove that it is Hamlet's identification with his 'absent', 'ghostly' father, rather than the oedipal Claudius, that is the root of the psychic and dramatic problem in the plot. Although the supporting analysis engages extensively with the text, the psychoanalytic side of it remains trapped in an excessively psychobiographical dimension of the original Freudian reading⁸. In order to demonstrate the psychoanalytic specificity of the father's absence and Hamlet's identification with it, Erlich unearths – that is, infers from the text – numerous details of the, supposedly real, primal scene in which Hamlet the child witnessed his father being 'castrated' and turned into 'incorporal air' by Gertrude (79, 85). Erlich defines this scene as the source of the fantasy that guides Hamlet through the play – i.e. that

...his father [come back] strong enough to punish the patricidal Claudius. If Hamlet were himself to punish Claudius, he would be openly admitting that the Father in heaven, that *his* father, has not punished and will not be able to punish; hence he delays, waiting for a father who will be strong in the end, even if the end is not until the day of judgment. (32, italics original)

However relevant this fantasy may be to the plot, its relation to the straightforwardly conceived primal scene between the old Hamlet and Gertrude is hard to accept. Despite all the meticulous attention to the poetry of the play where, in Erlich's view, the images

⁸ Hinted at already in the above quoted letter to Fliess: 'I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intention, but believe, rather, that a real event stimulated the poet to his representation, in that his unconscious understood the unconscious of his hero' (Masson 272) – and developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: 'For it can of course only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in Hamlet. I observe in a book on Shakespeare by Georg Brandes (1896) a statement that *Hamlet* was written immediately after the death of Shakespeare's father (1601)...It is known, too, that Shakespeare's own son who dies at an early age bore the name 'Hamnet', which is identical with 'Hamlet' (368).

of this scene are recognisably evoked⁹, its traumatic impact on Hamlet is inexplicable without the attention to the other scene – that of the fratricide – and thus Hamlet’s identification with Claudius. Thus while Erlich does draw attention to the problem of identification of the primal scene in the play, his analysis does not move far beyond adjustment of attention to one rather than the other (represented and implicit) scenes. The problem of primacy itself and its relation to trauma in Freud’s theory is not addressed, which prevents Erlich from articulating fully the relevance of the Oedipus complex problem to Shakespeare’s play as its representative, rather than one particular, example.¹⁰

Adjustment of analytical focus characterises the earlier major psychoanalytic interpretation of *Hamlet* – that by Jacques Lacan in a section of the seminar VI on ‘Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*’ (quoted in the epigraph). Even though it comes close to Erlich’s thesis about Hamlet’s identification with the absent, ghostly father, the actual identification which Lacan singles out in his more advanced – i.e. structuralist rather than psychobiographical – study is the one between Hamlet and Gertrude. Lacan’s emphasis is on the fact that, each in their turn, Gertrude and Hamlet appear equally unable to choose between the old Hamlet and Claudius. Although this attention to Hamlet-Gertrude relationship is certainly justified in terms of Shakespeare’s text, Lacan never pursues its implications with regard to Freud’s original reading of the play in conjunction with Sophocles outside the ‘few indications’ he delivers. The chief

⁹ E.g., Erlich takes Gertrude’s words to Hamlet ‘Your bedded hair like life in excrements/ Start up and stand an end. O gentle son,/Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper/ Sprinkle cool patience’ (3.4.122-24) to evoke ‘liquid relief’ of ‘something “bedded” leaping to an erection’ in direct reference to the reaction that Hamlet had when as a child he witnessed ‘the primal scene’ between his parents (84).

¹⁰ The absence of any engagement with Sophocles’ play only adds to the limiting peculiarities of Erlich’s approach to *Hamlet* via the Oedipus complex.

one of them does little more than reiterate the original Freudian distinction between Hamlet as ‘the subject who *knows*’ and Oedipus ‘who is actually completely innocent, unconscious, and unaware’ (Lacan 42, 43).

Lacan’s theory of desire as granted symbolically in return for the subject’s surrender of direct incestuous enjoyment (castration) – and, correlatively, the disablement of Hamlet’s desire by the sight of this enjoyment in Gertrude and Claudius rejecting the castration embodied in the Ghost – proved a strong inspiration for Marjorie Garber’s engagement with *Hamlet* in *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (1987), Janet Adelman’s *Suffocating Mothers* (1992), and Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard’s *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (1993). While Adelman concentrates on Hamlet’s maternal relationship in both historical and dramatic contexts of the Elizabethan/Jacobean period, Garber, and Lupton and Reinhard do engage at length with Freud’s original reading of *Hamlet*. However, they do it, on the one hand, to trace the personal circumstances of its emergence in Freudian thought and, on the other, again to adjust it to their own theoretical terms rather than to contrast it with a detailed reading of Sophocles alongside Shakespeare. Substituting Freud for Sophocles, the two studies remain tied to the fundamental framework of the Freudian reading of the two plays which, indeed, implies a kind of ‘uncanny causality’ between them, with Oedipus’ drama allegedly inhering in Hamlet’s mind. The only major adjustment that they offer is the reversal of this causality in favour of Hamlet (and Freud), having duly noted that it is Oedipus, with his opacity as a representative of psychic instinct, that needs to be explained: ‘[Oedipus] story of killing the father, which would seem to express Freud’s filial ambivalence, in fact

represses it: the murdered father can forever remain innocent while the son shoulders the guilt' (Garber 168-69). For Lupton and Reinhard, and incidentally Jonathan Crewe,

The hermeneutic of discovery as well as the concurrent dynamic of appropriation would indeed seem to make *Hamlet* rather than *Oedipus Rex* the crucial 'Freudian' work, since it is in relation to it rather than the Greek play that the *discovery* of the oedipal structure of unconscious desire can be (re)effected. (Crewe, 'Naught So Damned' 41, qtd. in Lupton and Reinhard 15, quotation marks and italics original)

Thus in this reversal of perspective, prompted in particular by contemporary probings into Freud's personal circumstances at the time of publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Oedipus, in contradiction to Starobinski, acquires the psychological depth which he furnished Hamlet with in Freud's original reading. However, for the literary critics like Vernant on the classicist side and Stephen Greenblatt on the Shakespearean side (whose most recent pronouncement on the issue was *Hamlet in Purgatory*), this switch should remain perfunctory because it does not engage deeply enough with the dramatic and historical substance of *both* texts and therefore does not demonstrate its relevance to them.¹¹

After this bibliographical excursion, it should become clearer how it is that a detailed engagement with *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* has not yet been undertaken since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The question now is certainly whether this engagement at the intersection between psychoanalytic and literary criticism is

¹¹ 'The overwhelming emphasis on the psychological dimension, crowned by psychoanalytical readings of the play..., has the odd effect of eliminating the Ghost as ghost, turning it into the prince's traumatic memory or, alternatively into a conventional piece of dispensable stage machinery...But we...can perhaps begin...by recognizing that the psychological in Shakespeare's tragedy is constructed almost entirely out of the theological, and specifically out of the issue of remembrance that, as we have seen, lay at the heart of the crucial early sixteenth-century debate about Purgatory' (Greenblatt 229). Indeed, for Garber, for example, the Ghost is a 'memory trace' (129), and for Erlich it is a 'projection' of the 'troubled imagination' (39).

necessary and viable. If it is to be agreed that psychoanalysis is limited to the instinctual-biological paradigm; and if it is to be agreed that tragedy as genre squarely belongs to the philological and traditionally historicist studies, then the answers to the two parts of the above question would have to be negative.

However, a careful reading of Freud, Sophocles, and Shakespeare cannot result in the required agreements. Psychoanalysis cannot be reduced to a straightforward biological paradigm, which became obvious already with Lacan's influential revision of Freudian theory centring on structural linguistics. At the same time tragedy has been long established as a thoroughly heterogeneous phenomenon, irreducible to its textual existence and immediate historical contexts. Its psychological, 'historically unlocated' element is indisputable even for Vernant who clearly recognises its volatility precisely through the need to bind it into a certain historico-psychological causality model. How exactly, then, can the relationship between psychoanalysis and the study of tragedy be restated so that it can overcome the largely artificial divisions between their analytical paradigms?

The example of *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* is certainly the key to the answer because it is not only the point of intersection between psychoanalysis and literary criticism but more importantly the point of their divergence. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit that point if its reconfiguration is to be envisaged. A simple return, however, with an increase in attention to the textual details of the plays and the intricacies of Freudian and post-Freudian metapsychology certainly will not do, as the above surveyed selection of sources has shown. The return needs to confront the specific theoretical problematics of Freud's approach to *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* which mark his attempt to strike a new path, in his theory and in literary criticism, at that point.

As has already been pointed out above, the structure of that approach is similar to the standard philosophical use of tragedy, exemplified already by Plato and Aristotle. What it purports to demonstrate, however, is certainly different: if philosophy placed consciousness at the centre of character, Freud displaced it in favour of the unconscious and repressed (incestuous) sexuality which in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is rooted in 'Nature'. He was certainly anticipating a furore, given his choice of literary texts to illustrate his discovery. This is evident in his correspondence with Fliess two years prior to the first publication of *The Interpretation*. After Freud confided his hunch about the source of power that *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* continued to exert over audiences in the much quoted letter of October 15, 1897, he wrote another one three weeks later wondering: 'You said nothing about my interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. Since I have not told it to anyone else, because I can well imagine in advance the bewildered rejection, I should like to have a short comment on it from you' (Masson 277). Later, Freud added the following footnotes to his passage on *Oedipus* in later editions of *The Interpretation*:

[*Footnote added 1914:*] None of the findings of psychoanalytic research has provoked such embittered denials, such fierce opposition – or such amusing contortions – on the part of critics as this indication of the childhood impulses towards incest which persist in the unconscious.... [*Added 1919:*] Later studies have shown that the 'Oedipus complex', which was touched upon for the first time in the above paragraphs in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, throws a light of undreamt-of importance on the history of the human race and the evolution of religion and morality (365; n.2).

Indeed, despite his apparent hesitation in the letters to Fliess, Freud was certainly enjoying the 'amusing contortions' of the opposition to his main thesis. Apart from the notoriety effect, which he may have been pursuing, the basis of his enjoyment certainly lay in what he considered a solid foundation of his theory which he outlined more

explicitly in *The Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis* published between 1915-17.

This foundation was certainly his redefinition of human 'Nature' because it was indeed this nature that his opponents¹² appealed to as a witness in their rejection of his theory:

You know what horror is felt, or at least professed, in human society at such [incestuous] intercourse, and what stress is laid on the prohibitions against it. Some people have supposed that breeding considerations on the part of Nature have found psychical representation in this prohibition, since inbreeding would impair racial characters. Others have maintained that, as a result of living together from early childhood onwards, sexual desire has been diverted from the people in question. In both cases, it may be remarked, an avoidance of incest would be secured automatically, and it would not be clear why such severe prohibitions were called for, which would point rather to the presence of a strong desire for it. Psycho-analytic researches have shown unmistakably that the choice of an incestuous love-object is, on the contrary, the first and invariable one, and that it is not until later that resistance to it sets in; it is no doubt impossible to trace back this resistance to *individual* psychology. (210)

When it comes to Freud's demonstration of the same logic at work in *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*, it remains rather at the level of his conviction that the reality in the plays is 'the same...at root' (332) as the clinically established reality of the naturally incestuous first choice of the sexual object. What betrays the contradiction between the two realities is, first of all, the word 'forced' which, in faithfulness to Sophocles' plot, Freud uses to describe Nature's influence in *The Interpretation*:

Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature, and after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scenes of our childhood (365).

That is, if, according to 'psychoanalytic researches', the first sexual choice is naturally incestuous, in what sense can it also be 'forced upon us' and, more particularly Oedipus,

¹² E.g., Edward Westermarck with his concept of 'reverse imprinting' from *The History of Human Marriage* (first published in 1891).

by the same 'Nature'? The obvious answer that is provided by Sophocles' text and by the recent painstaking rereading of Freudian metapsychology by Jean Laplanche is that the choice in question cannot be limited to nature as such – that is, the biological-instinctual mechanism that is responsible for the endogenous, stage-by-stage development of sexuality in Freud's later theory of drives. What is missing from Freud's conceptualisation from *The Interpretation* onwards is the impact of the nurturer on this development.

Indeed, the role of 'Nature' in Sophocles is played by Apollo's oracle which is hard to interpret as simply a representation of Oedipus' hidden (unconscious) wishes as Freud does. On the contrary, what can be attributed to Oedipus is resistance to their encroaching imposition from outside. To be sure, Freud mentions in *The Introductory Lectures* the resistance that 'sets in' 'later'; however, in Sophocles' text, the resistance is present at the very moment of Oedipus' birth. Under the influence of the oracle which presents parricide to him not as wish but as an unconditional fact, Laius violently inscribes his negation of it into Oedipus' body (and, effectively, his name) at the moment of his birth when Oedipus obviously cannot be the subject of the respective wishes and actions.¹³ This inscription, meaningful for Laius and Jocasta, remains for Oedipus a physically present but completely incomprehensible deformity¹⁴ until the arrival of the Corinthian. Conversely, the oracular messages he receives from Apollo and

¹³ Which is point is poignantly made by Jocasta: 'As for the child I bore him, not three days passed / before he yoked the ball joints of its feet, / then cast it, by others hands, on a trackless mountain./ That Time Apollo did not make our child/ a patricide...' (717-21, Gould).

¹⁴ 'It is impossible to tell from this word [*kakon*, 'evil', 'trouble'] that Oedipus uses to refer to it 'whether Sophocles meant us to think of a painful or even crippling infirmity or merely disfiguring marks (perhaps even slight ones) of which Oedipus was ashamed' (Gould 123, note to the line 1033). As it is often the case in the play, the ambiguity of this word is intrinsic to Oedipus' ambivalence about this matter, at once long-forgotten and evoking strong emotion once it is mentioned ('A fearful rebuke those tokens left for me!' (1035, Gould)).

Teiresias are comprehensible at the level of language but completely incomprehensible in relation to his volition. Thus it is clear that, in Freudian terms, the patricidal and incestuous 'wishes' in this case are not only imposed on Oedipus by heterogeneous, external agents since (before) his birth, but that the heterogeneity of this imposition, far from being a function of 'Nature', simultaneously constitutes the negation/repression of these wishes.

In all fairness to Freud, and contrary to his detractors who, like Vernant, impute to him a straightforward ascription of these 'wishes' to Oedipus¹⁵, there is a clear perception not only of their imposition in his accounting for the effect of the play as a 'tragedy of destiny'¹⁶ but also a subtle suggestion of their repressive externality:

His destiny moves us only...because the oracle laid the same curse upon *us*... King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows *us* the fulfilment of *our* own childhood wishes...Here is one in whom these primaeval wishes of *our* childhood have been fulfilled, and *we* shrink back from him with the whole force of the repression by which those wishes have since that time been held down within *us*. While the poet, as he unravels the past, brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling *us* to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found... Like Oedipus, *we* live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon *us* by *Nature*, and after their revelation *we* may all of *us* well seek to close our eyes to the scenes of our childhood. (364-65 italics added)

There is a striking slippage between the oracle's 'curse', 'us', and 'Nature' as the imposing/repressive agency vis-à-vis Oedipus. As much as Freud wanted to make nature the universal, biological foundation of this causal chain, it is certainly the odd one out.

¹⁵ 'Oedipus Without Complex', p.108.

¹⁶ However obsolete this designation might have already been virtually at the time of the first publication of *The Interpretation*, according to Richard Armstrong: 'Virtually as he was writing the *Interpretation of Dreams*, the great philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf [in his "Excuse zum Oedipus des Sophokles" published in 1899] was destroying the kind of reading Freud provides here as the manifest content of *Oedipus Rex* [i.e. the abstract struggle between free will and determinism] (*Oedipus as Evidence*).

For it can play the role assigned to it among the other members of the chain only through *personification* (reflected not the least in the use of capital 'N'). Thus, contrary to Starobinski, there *is* a definite, albeit repressed, germ of psychological three-dimensionality in Freud's reading of Oedipus. The only sense in which this character can be said to have no psychological 'depth of his own' is that this depth is literally not his own but formed through an outside imposition of the repressed acts of parricide/incest. Such a vision of psychology in Sophocles would allow psychoanalysis to adjust its relationship to the literary studies of tragedy effectively balancing concentration on the unconscious with attention to the crucial facts of the tragedy's context and dramatic substance. Moreover, it would provide a possibility for a similar balanced approach to the psychology in *Hamlet* which is also preoccupied with Hamlet's resistance to the obscene 'nature' imposed by and personified in Claudius and Gertrude's 'remembrance of ourselves', enhanced later by the ambiguity of sin and pathos in the Ghost. Why did Freud seem impelled to gloss this imposition over with the idea of endogenously formed sexual wishes?

Freudian studies have offered many answers to this question, especially since the 1960s which saw the publication of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis' 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality' (1964; translated into English in 1968). A different and more notorious publication on the matter, Jeffrey Masson's *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*, came out in 1984 almost simultaneously with the English translations of Marie Balmary's *Psychoanalysing Psychoanalysis* (1982) and Marianne Krüll's *Freud and his Father* (1986) which received much less attention. All of these studies, in their different ways, concentrated closely on Freud's so-called 'suppression' or abandonment of the seduction theory of

neuroses announced privately in a letter of September 27, 1897, to Fliess (written only three weeks before the one where Freud first sketched his comparison of *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*). The major distinction between Laplanche/Pontalis and Balmory/Masson/Krüll's takes on the matter pertains to their understanding of the reality status of seduction and its 'suppression' by Freud. By 1897, Freud himself saw this status as a crucial stumbling block, formed by a convergence of serious analytical frustrations:

[First,] the continual disappointment in my efforts to bring a single analysis to a real conclusion;...Then, the surprise that in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse – the realization of the unexpected frequency of hysteria, with precisely the same conditions prevailing in each, whereas surely such widespread perversions against children are not very probable...Then, third, the certain insight that there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction...Fourth, the consideration that in the most deep-reaching psychosis the unconscious memory does not break through, so that the secret of childhood experiences is not disclosed even in the most confused delirium. (Masson 264-65, italics original)

In the face of this convergence, Freud found himself forced to redefine the foundation of the unconscious, the object of (primal) repression, as the subject's own 'phantasy' based on the endogenous development of sexuality and repression from the first days of infancy – rather than imposed by the external, 'perverse', adult agent whose primacy he was still affirming to Fliess less than a year before¹⁷. This is, indeed, the point where Freud's theory deviates from the 'reality' of seduction in his analytical practice and in

¹⁷ 'It seems to me more and more that the essential point of hysteria is that it results from *perversion* on the part of the seducer, and *more and more* that heredity is seduction by the father. Thus an alternation emerges between generations:

1st generation – perversion

2nd generation – hysteria...

[all hysteric attacks] are aimed at *another person* – ...mostly at the prehistoric, unforgettable other person who is never equaled by anyone later' (Masson 212-13).

Oedipus and *Hamlet*. Freud's interpretation of them in the light of this deviation certainly did not strike a note completely unrelated to the interpretative tendencies at the time.¹⁸ But it is certainly deeply ironic that the plays he chose to inaugurate his disavowal of the reality of (paternal) seduction in favour of the endogenous infantile sexuality were the two tragedies where the 'guilt' which 'the poet...brings to light' and to which the audience uniquely reacts has everything to do with the parental and wider cultural impact on the child. On the other hand, such a step had its own indisputable logic in the face of the other alternative where the seduction theory postulating real sexual assault as the basis of neuroses compelled Freud to suspect and condemn virtually every father of every family without the possibility of proving this *sine qua non*. Only by discarding this narrowly empirical-pathological understanding of seduction could Freud start elaborating a new approach to theorising the unconscious that would account for its apparently universal presence. In Freud's own words in the last chapter of *The Interpretation*,

Whether we are to attribute *reality* to unconscious wishes, I cannot say. It must be denied, of course, to any transitional or intermediate thoughts [i.e. the purely fantasmatic psychological field]. If we look at unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape, we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that *psychical* reality [i.e. that of the unconscious wishes] is a particular form of existence which is not to be confused with *material* reality. (782, italics original)

For Balmary, Krüll, and especially Masson, Freud's turning away from the '*material*' reality of seduction amounts not so much to a theoretical misstep but to an effective

¹⁸ A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* which alleged that Hamlet, once a healthy and decisive individual, was portrayed by Shakespeare as suffering from 'melancholia' was written almost simultaneously with *The Interpretation of Dreams* (and published in 1905).

complicity in the actual sexual assaults on children¹⁹. It is hard to disagree with Laplanche who characterised their analyses as working within a ‘crude opposition between reality and fantasy’, whereas the whole point of Freud’s work was certainly to raise psychological studies ‘beyond that opposition’ to a genuinely theoretical level (*New Foundations* 122). However, if classifying the unconscious content as ‘phantasy’ grafted onto an increasingly monadical concept of human biology seemed to Freud a worthy path for his theoretical breakthrough, Laplanche defines it also as the fundamental ‘going-astray’. The inadequacy of the concept of ‘Nature’ as the force imposing the primary sexual choice and shaping the psychic constitution of the subject became obvious in the general development of Freud’s thought as it was in its above discussed application to *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*. What Freud needed to approach the unconscious in all its baffling specificity was a category that would fall outside both narrow pathological empiricism and quasi-biological realism. Conversely, the study of tragedy has also been tending towards an approach that would overcome the limitations of the traditional philosophical, psychological, and philological readings²⁰. The point where these two critical necessities seem to meet very productively is the category of the message introduced by Jean Laplanche in the course of his restoration and comprehensive revision of Freud’s seduction theory, with the unmistakable echo in the above quoted polemics of Vernant against Freud.²¹ In what sense does message, with

¹⁹ The most recent work that is developing this thesis is Mary Marcel’s *Freud’s Traumatic Memory: Reclaiming the Seduction Theory* (2005).

²⁰ A number of recent studies of the matter – Michelle Gellrich’s *Tragedy and Theory* (1988), Susan Gearhart’s *The Interrupted Dialectic* (1992), and Terry Eagleton’s *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic* (2003) – have all been investigating the possibility of a more inclusive, ‘heuristic’ approach to tragedy (Gellrich 8).

²¹ ‘...the meaning present within the work...must be painstakingly reconstructed through a study at every level of the message that a legendary tale or a tragic fiction constitutes’ (‘Oedipus Without the Complex’ 86).

Laplanche, become a fundamental category in psychoanalytic theory and in what sense can it be relevant to the study of the two particular tragedies in question?

Laplanche uses this, at first sight, broad term to return to Freud's abandonment of the empirical seduction in favour of 'Nature' and tease out the elusive 'truth' of the unconscious that is glimpsed and lost in the transition between these two stages in Freud's theory. The term 'message' helps to achieve a recovery of this truth by mobilising its etymology based on the hierarchical dualism of the missive and its carrier.²² That is, Laplanche sees the discovery of the 'third' kind of reality in the unconscious carried by Freud throughout his oeuvre but at the same time repressed in both his pre-1897 pathological and post-1897 biological conceptions of it. The crux of that discovery is indeed that sexuality does not develop 'naturally' within the biological stage-to-stage progression but betrays a pattern of *Nachträglichkeit* ('deferred action' or 'afterwardsness'²³). Initially developed on the basis of Charcot's theory of hereditary predisposition to hysteria, this notion helped Freud to describe the peculiar constitution of sexual trauma, split between the real but completely missed sexual seduction in the victim's 'pre-sexual' age and the neutral event that awakened the affective memory of that seduction and thus precipitated the trauma (and neurosis) after puberty. With his attention turned away from the pathology of seduction to biology, Freud did not abandon this dualist model because he was convinced of its relevance to the traumatic impact of

²² From early to late medieval periods, European vernacular languages (Anglo-Norman, Middle English, Old French, Old Occitan, Catalan, Spanish, Italian) employed their equivalents of 'message' both in the sense of 'communication, news' and 'messenger, envoy' combining the 'post-classical Latin *missiaticum*' (message, errand) and '*missiaticus*' (messenger, envoy). The carrier here is thus certainly subordinated and overshadowed by the charge. In particular, Old French attests the use of 'message' as 'communication by a divinely inspired messenger', which introduces an extra level of distinction between the communicator and communiqué (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

²³ The first variant of translation is proposed by James Strachey in the English translation of the *Standard Edition* of Freud's works; the second one is devised by Laplanche to render the particularity of Freud's usage more effectively.

sexuality even though he may have placed both events of sexual trauma in the pre-pubertal period (*From the History of Infantile Neurosis*) or placed one of them in the prehistory of mankind (*Totem and Taboo*). Despite the marginalisation of the external seducing agency here in favour of the individual's ontogenetic or phylogenetic past, the latter still betrayed, for Freud, the traumatic 'bedrock' which was independent from the individual's fantasising activity as such and which drew this activity, as in the case of the real seduction, into its orbit as the individual matured (Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language*, 336, 332). Laplanche certainly does not dispute the confrontation between the child and sexuality in a fantasised, repressed form long before the child's biological and mental development is able to account for it. However, even for Freud its exclusive phylogenetic conditioning is hardly conceivable precisely because of the conjunction between the child's prematurity and early confrontation with sexuality in *both* fantasmatic and repressed (real) form, necessary for its later traumatic impact²⁴. Thus, for Laplanche and, as he argues, for Freud, it is not biology itself but the position of child's biological and cultural dependence on the adult with a fully developed sexuality that creates the foundation for the latter's traumatic development. The child's sexual fantasy here does not arise automatically at the juncture of 'the pressure of the instinct' and phylogenetically transmitted scenario that corresponds to its (imaginary) fulfilment mechanically triggered by the adult's presence. On the contrary, it is the adult's fully formed unconscious that is triggered by the child's presence (the adult's former self) into

²⁴ 'The uniformity of the content of the sexual life of children, together with the unvarying character of the modifying tendencies which are later brought to bear upon it, will easily account for the constant sameness which as a rule characterizes the phantasies that are constructed around the period of childhood, irrespective of how greatly or how little real experiences have contributed towards them. It is entirely characteristic of the nuclear complex of infancy [i.e. the Oedipus complex] that the child's father should be assigned the part of a sexual opponent and of an interferer with auto-erotic sexual activities; *and real events are usually to a large extent responsible for bringing this about*' (Freud, 'Notes' 208n., italics added).

imposing its own repressed, fantasmatic presence onto their interaction. Thus it is through this enigma emanating from the adult other that the child is confronted with the unconscious and the necessity to translate its 'message'.

Laplanche opts for the term 'message' also to emphasise the 'primal', pre-verbal character of this confrontation in a purposeful opposition to Lacan's narrowly linguistic concept of the unconscious 'structured like a language'²⁵. Laplanche draws attention to the child's *infans* and biologically vulnerable state which concentrates his or her interaction with the adult primarily not on verbal communication but on bodily functions and which establishes the physical acts of parental care as the primary channel of the unconscious/repressed sexual communication. Attention to this foundational level of interaction allows Laplanche to articulate a realistic conception of seduction as a 'primal', 'universal' element in human development that is found 'beyond even the most general contingency' (*New Foundations* 89).

The term 'message' certainly cannot re-establish the primacy of seduction in psychoanalysis without employing its 'enigmatic' qualifier in a specific sense as well. For the unconscious sexual message received by the child from the adult is enigmatic not only because of the developmental difference between them but because of what Laplanche calls 'the primordial split' between the adult and the message itself ('Transference' 221). Because the adult's unconscious was formed in exactly the same situation of ontological inequality, he or she is only an unconscious transmitter but *not* the originator of the message. The message thus always remains at the periphery of the

²⁵ This schematically replaces Freud's 'Nature' with the 'symbolic order' of signifiers into which the child is inserted just as another signifier, \$. The symbol represents the S-subject 'barred' from its essence by the empty 'I' of discourse (hence \$) which, in return, allows the subject access to 'desire' in the symbolic order based on the rule of metaphoric-metonymic transposition of signifiers. Before accession to this order, the subject as such does not exist for Lacan – therefore, access to the primal situation can only be infinitely approximated.

subject's psychosomatic organisation as a 'foreign body'²⁶ whose origin (original meaning) is intrinsically inaccessible. Hence its 'enigma' and Laplanche's preference for Freud's early term 'translation' as the technical description of the subject's engagement with the message – as opposed to 'interpretation' which represses the message's intrinsic alterity.

Having thus redefined the primacy of seduction, Laplanche certainly has not done away with its pathogenic dimension. The primal nature of seduction means that the subject's translating activity can never be entirely successful. Like Apollo's oracle or the Ghost of King Hamlet, the enigmatic message initiates and guides the subject's translation of this message beyond the subject's ability to disengage from this process.²⁷ In reality, freedom of translation certainly exists, but it is made relative not only by the fact of the subject's birth but also by the immediate (familial) and larger cultural circumstances determining his or her confrontation with the adult world. The combination of these complex factors can significantly enable or disable the translatability of the enigmatic message. Accordingly, Laplanche distinguishes between two modes of its transmission – 'implantation' and 'intromission' – that exert the respective effects. In the case of implantation, the message's foreign substance is introduced, as it were, osmotically, in a 'common, everyday, normal or neurotic' manner into the 'psychophysiological skin' of the subject, which 'allows the individual to take things up actively, at once translating and repressing' ('Implantation, Intromission' 136). By contrast, intromission is the invasive, 'psychotic' mode which relies primarily on

²⁶ The term introduced already by Freud already in *Studies in Hysteria* where he uses it to describe the lasting effect of the adult's 'entry' into the child's life (6).

²⁷ This extends even beyond death which, in Oedipus' and Hamlet's respective realities, only makes the confrontation with the primal enigma absolute (unlike life where repression and thus temporary respite are still possible).

bodily orifices to put 'into the interior an element resistant to all metabolisation' (136). The fundamental point about this distinction is that implantation and intromission are present in every given case of seduction, with the balancing between them accounting for each case's degree of pathology. This distinction allows Laplanche not only to differentiate between the translatable and untranslatable components in the enigmatic message (and thus to account for the formation of different psychic agencies²⁸) but to articulate the specific reality of the unconscious as *growing* out of a *prolonged* and intricate process of exposure to implantation/intromission and the correlative work of metabolisation. Such a dynamic concept of the unconscious solves Freud's dilemma of the infinite regression either into the real or phylogenetic past in search of the ultimate primal scene by making it clear that the primal element comes into being and achieves its full traumatic impact not in the actual or purely fantasised first encounter between the child and adult sexuality but *afterwards*²⁹ – or in the case of a tragedy, *towards the end*. It is through successive scenes that the former child is led into a pattern of increasing entanglement in the primal circumstances of the enigma, irreducible to any one real or imagined encounter.

Although Laplanche's revision of the seduction theory affirms 'the cultural' as its fundamental dimension and seems closely related to the plots of *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*, he has never revisited in depth Freud's comparison of the two tragedies ('Transference' 222). However, he does return to the problematics of this comparison at another level in his dealing with another one of Freud's privileged comparisons where the founder of psychoanalysis aligns himself with Copernicus and Darwin on account of the blow that

²⁸ E.g., the superego as a 'psychotic enclave' of the untranslatable, intromitted material.

²⁹ *nachträglich* or '*après-coup*'.

his discovery of the unconscious dealt to human self-centredness ('A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis'). While Freud may have considered himself a new Copernicus after (apparently) solving the riddle of neuroses with the concept of their allogenic origin, he, in Laplanche's view, only posited for himself and his followers another riddle by attempting to fit his discovery later into the self-centred (endogenous) paradigm. That is why Laplanche considers Freud not only 'his own Copernicus' but also 'his own Ptolemy', having carefully demonstrated that neither tendency ever won a complete victory in Freud's thought. Hence Laplanche's designation of Freud's project as the 'unfinished Copernican revolution' ('Revolution' 60). Such a representation of Freud's theoretical duality which microcosmically reflects 'the revolution in astronomy' that 'lasted nearly two millennia' and had *different* figures responsible for its 'intuitions of truth' and 'goings-astray' helps to underscore the primacy of Freud's identification with Oedipus and Hamlet – not only as those who manage to discover the most hidden secrets but also as those who also monumentally *fail* in these discoveries.

It is such a balanced perception of homology between Freud, Oedipus, and Hamlet based on the Copernican-Ptolemaic ambivalence of their dramatic/investigative trajectories that can provide specific terms for a comprehensive approach to the comparison between the two plays within the psychoanalytic perspective. It helps to focus analytical attention on the wealth of material on alterity pervading the oeuvres in question at every level – mythical, dramatic, and textual – without sacrificing the theoretical context of Freud's original linking of the plays. It is no longer necessary, for a psychoanalytic analysis of the myth-based tragedy (such as *Oedipus* and, in a different sense, *Hamlet*), to insist on a distinction between the universal mythical identity of Oedipus and the fact that already for Marie Delcourt it was impossible to recognise

Oedipus' identity as a universal pre-given: 'Il n'y a pas d' Œdipe primitif. Ce qui est primitif, ce sont les thèmes qui, en s'articulant les uns aux autres, sont devenus d'abord les gestes d'Œdipe, puis sa vie et enfin son caractère' (ix)³⁰. A similar pattern is established by William F. Hansen in his recent translation and detailed commentary on the Amleth tradition (*Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*). The contradictory and incomplete nature of the content throughout the narrative and dramatic tradition in question can now be an intrinsic part of the psychoanalytic literary analysis, constituting an important layer of reference for the theoretically informed study of the alterity determining the inter-generic relation between myth and tragedy.

A related and no less important layer of reference in this study, which a Laplanchean rereading of Freud helps to integrate into the analysis, is the material existence of the texts in question. What is quite rarely acknowledged outside the editors' and translators' commentary on Sophocles' *Oedipus* is not only the range of conjecture inherent in their work with the text but the very basis for this situation. It is known from *Life of Lycurgus*³¹ that 'already within some 70 years after the death of Sophocles' (Jebb lviii) – that is, 'between 338 and 326 B.C.' (Lloyd-Jones 16) –

the Athenian actors had tampered in such wise with the texts of the three great dramatists that the orator Lycurgus caused a standard copy to be deposited in the public archives of Athens, and a regulation to be made that an authorised person should follow in a written text the performances given on the stage, with a view to controlling unwarranted change (Jebb lviii).

³⁰ 'There is no Oedipus [as an individual character] to begin with. What is there is a mutual articulation of a number of themes which, at first, become the deeds of Oedipus, then his life, and then his character.'

³¹ 'The chief source for the life of Lycurgus is the Pseudo-Plutarch's biography of him in the *Lives of the Ten Orators*. This seems to be derived from the work of Caecilius of Calacte (first century B.C.), who perhaps drew on the earliest life of Lycurgus, that written by Philiscus just after the orator's death.' (Burt x).

Although Jebb's dramatic view of the discrepancy between the manuscripts of Sophocles available to the modern editors and the supposed originals is significantly corrected by Lloyd-Jones in favour of a much stronger continuity, the initial gap of seventy odd years between Sophocles' death and Lycurgus' preservation decree cannot be easily dismissed³². All the known work that has been done on these texts postdates and logically follows, sometimes to the extreme, Lycurgus' initiative³³. In the introduction to his recent edition and translation of Sophocles' plays (1994), Lloyd-Jones reiterates, as a very probable fact, the opinion of W.S. Barrett (*Euripides, Hippolytos* (1964)) who argues that the so-called official copy of the plays produced under Lycurgus 'is likely to have been no more than an ordinary text of its day, carrying most of the modifications established by actors during the preceding century' (Lloyd-Jones, *Oedipus* 17). In addition, the quality and sophistication of work on the manuscripts was steadily declining after the age of Augustus with the full-scale revival coming only after the end of the Thirty Years' War with the landmark edition of Brunck in 1786. Thus, even given the fact that 'on the whole, the text of Sophocles has fared better in the MSS. than that of either Aeschylus or Euripides' and that the scholars have the relative benefit of relying on a big difference in quality between the Laurentian manuscript (Byzantium, c.11th century) and the rest, Jebb's description of Sophocles' text as 'a country with generally good roads, but an occasional deficiency of bridges' (lviii) still defines the essence of its current state for modern editors like Gould and

³² The gap between the disputed date of the original production of *Oedipus* and Lycurgus' decree is approximately one hundred years.

³³ It is known that Ptolemy III Euergetes I retained the official copy which he borrowed from Athens for the Alexandrian Library in the early 3rd century despite the fifteen talent fine. This made the 2nd century editions of the three tragedians by Aristophanes of Byzantium, Aristarchus, and Didymus *Khalkénteros* possible and thus promoted the transmission of the texts beyond their time – although, necessarily, without any guarantee of their proximity to the originals.

Lloyd-Jones and, therefore, should be seriously taken into account in the analysis which grapples with the conflict between the acts and desire of the protagonist at the level of content.

The situation with the text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its three main versions has certainly received much more attention. Relatively more proximity to what might have been the original script (Q2) has not resulted in the resolution of the complexity of this situation. On the contrary, the textual scholarship on *Hamlet* and Shakespeare in general has become a prime ground for questioning not only the author's role in the constitution of the dramatic text but of the text itself as the origin of dramatic performance. The studies of Sophocles' texts lead exactly to the same problem of origin positioned between the author's text, the performance text, and the editors' text. And it is certainly the theatrically pragmatic dimension of the text that is increasingly acknowledged as the main formative aspect in its development, with the supposed original constituting often only a relative and imperfect starting point of the text's potentially endless evolution through productions.³⁴ The unique position of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in relation to this perspective is that they thematise the uncertainty of the protagonist's relation to his acts at the level of plot as well as the text – and thus productively contribute to the psychoanalytic focus on alterity.

There certainly exist studies which have already attempted to approach the relationship between *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* at the intersection between mythology, drama, and psychoanalysis – for example, André Lorant's 1982 'Hamlet et Œdipe', which is

³⁴ Extensively discussed by Emrys Jones in *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (1971) and John Jones in *Shakespeare at Work* (1995) from a generically theatrical point of view, and most recently addressed by Pascale Aebischer in *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: stage and screen performance* (2004) with a distinctly theoretical (feminist and psychoanalytic) approach.

trying to amplify the work of Freud, Ernest Jones, and Starobinski with mythological detail based on the work of Marie Delcourt's *Œdipe; ou La légende du conquérant* and reading of Saxo's tale of Amleth. It offers interesting juxtapositions for further analysis (e.g., the function of the Sphinx and the Ghost in the play in relation to their evolution in the respective traditions); however, it leaves the engagement with the problematics of the main juxtaposition – that between Freud and other approaches to the comparison – outside of its scope.

A more compelling example of comparison between the two plays has been offered by Adrian Poole in the chapter 'Questions and Answers: Sophocles, Shakespeare' of his *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (1987). Without drawing explicitly on the complexities of the intra-psychoanalytical debate of the last forty years, the chapter provides its own critique of Freud's comparison of the two plays. In a most intuitive relation to the latter, it emphasises the central role that the 'gulf' (93) between 'questions and answers' – and thus the enigma and its interpretation – plays in the constitution of the protagonists and respective conflicts. It is certainly the dramatic representation of and critical approaches to this 'gulf' in Sophocles and Shakespeare, at all the levels discussed above (narrative-mythological, textual-dramatic, and theoretical), that will be the focus of attention in the following two sections of analysis devoted respectively to *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*.

2.1 Oedipus – Philosopher?

In the course of the last three centuries, at least, the story of Oedipus, the legendary prehistorical king of Greek Thebes, has become one of the most overappropriated narratives in Western culture. This process made Oedipus in his turn arguably the most historic mythical figure of the Greek heroic age. It is certainly noteworthy that it is in its 5th century Sophoclean tragic form that his story has managed to gain its enormous currency throughout the European cultural tradition.

As we have indicated above, the need for a reasonable interdisciplinary approach to Sophocles' *Oedipus* has already been realised. The recent publication of *Oedipus, Philosopher* (1993) by Jean-Joseph Goux is a highly representative attempt to address this need. Through its extensive scope and ambitious agenda, it has managed to problematise our understanding of the Oedipus myth and Sophocles' tragedy with a new topical force. Therefore, before we launch into our own analysis of the play, we would need to consider at greater length the interpretative claims of this study, which will also help us to analyse the known tradition of the Oedipus myth with regard to the peculiarities of its transformations in Sophocles' text.

In an effort to provide a historically exhaustive and methodologically rigorous analysis of the Theban legend, *Oedipus, Philosopher* traditionally challenges its classic schematic appropriations – those by Freud and Lévi-Strauss – in order to reinscribe it as a symbol of cultural deviation founding Western rationalism and modernity. What constitutes this intrinsic deviation, according to Goux, is the peculiar 'filiarchal', 'autocratic' or 'autological' spirit that underlies both Oedipus' character and, subsequently, the philosophers and men of modernity. Its essence is foreclosure and

denial of ancestry – and, consequently, any knowledge conceived as tradition.

‘Filiarchy’ realises itself here through self-engendering and ‘autodidacticism’, resulting in the historically increasing ‘deprojection’ of the previous projecting of the divine upon the human subject who becomes the centre of the modern universe, democratically freed from law as tradition and ruled instead by law as achievement.

In order to present the Oedipus myth and subsequent European culture as the developing epitome of this humanism, Goux constructs a convincing genealogical line originating in Oedipus symbolically and, at least, Socrates and Protagoras historically. The evolution of this anthropocentric line then spans through primarily such figures as Descartes, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche. The unifying symbol for this genealogy is taken to be Oedipus’ way of dealing with the Sphinx and her riddle. His assumed response to it - ‘Man’ – is taken here as a specifically intellectual, verbal answer to the monster’s enigma, as opposed to the traditionally prescribed bloody combat. Such way of dealing with monsters is meant, Goux insists, to mark the end of supremacy of the gods and the unspeakable over human consciousness. Conceived in this manner, Oedipus’ confrontation with the Sphinx, indeed, cannot help being an appropriate symbol for the Cartesian *cogito*, Hegelian dissolution of the ‘unconscious symbolics’ (*Die unbewusste Symbolik*) by the modern subject, Feuerbachian and Marxist ideological deconstruction of religion as well as its Nietzschean decomposition that inaugurates the *Übermensch*.

The deviancy of such anthropocentrism is proved for Goux by its supposed origin in the myth of parricide and incest. Furthermore, submitting the myth to structuralist segmentation, Goux makes Oedipus’ encounter with the Sphinx bear the most of the weight in support of his claim that the other two crucial elements, the

parricide and incest, constitute only a two-fold consequential punishment for the 'anomalous' absence of the bloodshed, self-sacrifice, and resurrection sequence in the hero's confrontation with the monster, now replaced by the 'sacrilegious intellectual presumptuousness'.

This structuralist disregard for the chronology of the myth, where the confrontation with the Sphinx comes in between the parricide and incest, becomes more understandable when Goux enlists a lengthy support from Plato in discussing the composition of human soul and particularly the soul of the tyrant made up of all possible sorts of *hubris* – intellectual, sexual, and governmental – which, for Goux and allegedly Plato, is precisely the picture of Oedipus. For them both, the tragic fate of Oedipus is the result of a preventable ethical flaw consisting in the failure to realise and maintain a balance in the tripartite unity of the human soul which, according to Plato, is composed of man representing intellect, lion representing passionate strength and courage, and a polycephalic beast representing sexuality. Oedipus' fault, according to this economy, is the assumption that the soul consists only of the human intellectual element, which, consequently, represses the other two and causes their violent transformation and eruption. Finally, this logo- and anthropocentrism, which in the end falls prey to the 'avoided initiation' into its own repressed passions, is what distinguishes Oedipus and his deviantly philosophical myth from the so-called monomyth of royal initiation (the term denoting normal myth, introduced by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*). This, apparently universal, kind of myth leads its hero through a similarly tripartite pattern of symbolic encounters with male and female figures where, necessarily, with and not in spite of the gods' help, the hero kills the right king who is *not* his father; kills (and not intellectually humiliates) the right *female* monster; and,

finally, marries the right woman who is a daughter of the right king, and *not* his queen-mother. For the examples of such monomyth in ancient Greece, Goux refers his reader to the stories of Jason the Argonaut, Perseus the Gorgon conqueror, and Bellerophon the Chimaira slayer.

Such a reading of Oedipus and his myth, despite its obvious philosophical as well as cultural strength, appears deeply problematic from a variety of points. It will be impossible to consider them all here at length, especially those concerned with subsequent philosophical and cultural reincarnation of Oedipus. However, what is possible and necessary is to address Goux's particular reading of the Oedipus myth and Sophocles' tragedy themselves that, although reasonable in its attempt to deal with philosophical and cultural limitations of the previous interpretations, is quite distorted and sometimes unsettling.

The main point to consider is Goux's understanding of Oedipus as a tragic figure. It is based, as we have seen, on the notion of a reprehensible deviation and the inevitable catastrophe at the end. This perfectly agrees with the ethics of Plato, the philosopher who banished tragedy from his ideal kingdom. Can we, thus, take Goux's interpretation as a Platonic translation of Aristotle's notion of *hamartia*?

The disputed meaning of this word can be reasonably designated by its general use in ancient Greek as well as in *The Poetics* in relation to the tragic hero. It generally means 'missing a target', especially, when throwing a spear, shooting an arrow etc. For Aristotle, this word refers to a feature in the character of the tragic hero, not necessarily bad in himself, yet which makes him imperfect enough to justify his downfall, thus not allowing for a perfectly virtuous man to be destroyed by the gods, which, according to Aristotle, would cause only disgust in the audience and fail to produce a good tragedy.

Equally, the tragedy would be a failure for Aristotle, if the tragic hero is a vile transgressor, in this case rightfully destroyed by the gods, because *hamartia* in tragedy must be inextricably linked with *eleos* and *phobos* traditionally translated as *pity* and *fear*.³⁵

What pity or sympathy, indeed, should we feel for a villain? Precisely this question arises repeatedly when one reads Goux's analysis of Oedipus, relating mainly to Sophocles' dramatic rendering of the story. Not only is Oedipus guilty of the intellectual and, apparently, by consequence, murderous and sexual *hubris* in that analysis, but he is also rightly punished by Apollo at the end by the revelation of the full truth. In 'missing a target with a spear' there is a rare balance of ambiguity between the thrust of the aiming hand and the course of the spear – that is, between human intention and the will of gods. For Aristotle, thus, Sophocles' Oedipus is still a hero and, actually, a model one, neither a villain nor a saint in his quest for truth, while for Plato and Goux for this same reason he is entirely and fundamentally deviant. Not only his 'missing the target' but the 'throwing of the spear' itself as opposed to that of Jason, Perseus, and Bellerophon is considered essentially wrong in its intent.

We could certainly look for the reasons of this puzzling discrepancy between Aristotle's and Plato's understanding of Oedipus in particular and tragedy in general in their respective philosophies, curiously mirrored in Goux's discussion of the issue. But this will not do justice to the tradition of the myth itself. To be sure, Goux's understanding of Oedipus is very philosophical, that is logically consistent and culturally

³⁵ Walter Kaufmann insists that 'there is no single word that is just right for rendering Aristotle's *eleos*. But a great poet once expressed the requisite meaning in a single line. The tragic emotion is not pity but what Goethe's Faust says as he sees Gretchen in the dungeon, out of her mind: *Der Menschheit ganzer Jammer fasst mich an* [line 4406] – we feel seized and shaken by the whole misery of humanity' (*Tragedy and Philosophy* 52).

well grounded within a carefully delineated ethical context. But what does the tradition itself have to say about Oedipus as a relentless and doomed autodidact?

Although the sources earlier than 5th century BC are mostly very fragmentary, it is still possible to reconstruct certain contours of his evolution. Both Richard Jebb's extensive introduction to his 1883 translation of *The Oedipus Tyrannus* and Timothy Gantz's 1993 two-volume monograph on the *Early Greek Myth*, which will demarcate our field of reference, agree (as do many others on which they draw) that the earliest available accounts of the Oedipus story are to be found in Homer.

The twenty-third book of the *Iliad* mentions Mekisteus, 'the son of Talaos and brother of Adrastos' (Gantz 501), 'who came to Thebes of yore when Oedipus had fallen, to his burying' (otherwise rendered as 'funeral games') (Jebb xii). Both Jebb and Gantz are quite certain that it would be quite 'remarkable' (Jebb xii) and 'not in accord with the tone of the epic language' (Gantz 501) to understand the word 'fallen' here - which derives from a verb designating a series of related heavy battle sounds such as soldiers' feet thudding, spears hurtling, or dead bodies falling to the ground - as a 'sudden fall from greatness' (Jebb, xii). Rather, Oedipus' death here results from some kind of violence, most probably 'at the hand of an assassin' or adversary in battle (Jebb xii).

The Nekyia, the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, does not directly support the *Iliad* reference but gives the first, more or less full account of Oedipus' story when Odysseus sees

...the mother of Oedipus, fair Epicastè, who wrought dread deed with unwitting mind, in that she wedded her son; but he had slain his father ere he wedded her; and *presently* the gods made these things known among men. Yet he *still ruled* over the Cadmeans in lovely Thebes *suffering anguish by the dire counsels of the gods*; but she went to the house of Hades, the strong warder, when she had *fastened a noose on high from the*

roof-beam, possessed by her pain; and *to him she bequeathed sorrows full many even all that a mother's Avengers [Erynies] bring to pass.* (Jebb xii, italics added)

As we can quite safely infer from these, probably, complementary accounts, the Homeric Oedipus survived the revelation of the truth of his 'crimes' and continued to rule over Thebes, being respectively honoured after his death, perhaps, in a battle or in a *coup d'état*, by funeral games. This is later, if a bit indirectly, supported by the *Works and Days* of Hesiod that describe 'the great heroes of the fourth age at Thebes' fighting 'for the flocks of Oedipus' (Jebb xiii). Besides, the existing fragment of *Ehoiai*, attributed to Hesiod and known also as the *Catalogue of Women*, seems to bring the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* accounts even closer to portraying Oedipus' funeral as 'a social event attended', apparently, 'by all women of Thebes [let alone men] and accompanied by much wonderment over the corpse of *much-grieved* Oedipus', while 'a scholiast to the *Iliad* passage adds that Argeia, daughter of Adrastus [i.e. niece of the above mentioned Mekisteus]' and 'at some point the wife of Polyneices, came "with others" ' (Gantz 502).

Considering this evidence, we can conclude that the Oedipus of this earliest available tradition is rather passive in terms of challenging the gods about the truth of his life. It is rather the gods that lead him in some way to the marriage with 'Epicastè' and then 'presently' (this word, *aphar*, in the above-quoted *Iliad* passage can also mean 'suddenly', 'shortly after') make the situation revealed, thus suggesting 'the swift Erynies', the mother's avengers, as the agents. The swiftness of revelation and retribution here almost surely precludes the possibility of offspring from the marriage which thus links the Homeric version of the myth to the later accounts of Pherekydes and Pausanias, who both say that Oedipus remarried after Epicastè/Jocasta's suicide and

that it was Euryganeia (apparently, Jocasta's sister) who gave birth to the four traditional children of Oedipus. There are no references here either to the deliverance of Thebes from the Sphinx (which, while it might be implied in Oedipus' marriage to Epicastè, is, as we will see, not always the case), or Oedipus' self-blinding, or Apollo's oracles and the city's plague.

After an extensive survey of various texts and scholia related to the Oedipus story both before and after Sophocles, Jebb and Gantz as well as other similar studies (notably the above mentioned *Oedipe ou le légend du conquérant*) agree that until 5th century Attic dramatists, the constitution and connection of what we now consider as major incidents of the Oedipus myth, such as visiting Delphi, parricide, encounter with the Sphinx, incest and revelation were not as fixed as we generally assume they were. And they certainly did not straightforwardly depend on what today is viewed as Oedipus' autodidactic quest for his identity. We have just seen that there is no connection between the Sphinx and Oedipus in Homer (who never mentions the monster at all in connection with Oedipus) and no remarkable one in Hesiod (who simply says in *Theogony* that she was 'the bane of Thebes' (Gantz 495)). On the other hand, it is 'fair Epicastè' who possesses the 'unwitting mind' with which *she*, and not Oedipus, is said in Homer to have 'wrought [the] dread deed' of marrying her son. This, certainly, is far from a conclusive piece of evidence that Oedipus' marriage was not a result of some kind of accomplishment on his part (again, such as vanquishing the Sphinx, for example). Yet, as has been noted above, the Homeric and Hesiodic Oedipus, at least as far as we can judge by the sources, is extremely passive in 'suffering the anguish by the gods', being 'much-grieved' and, finally, 'fallen' most probably at somebody's hand, leaving 'his flocks' to be fought over. Also, presumably not blinded by himself or

anybody else as it happens in later tradition, he continues to rule and is honoured at his decease while it is Epicastè who obtains the tragic prominence in the *Odyssey* by her sensitivity to the revelations and the active heroic status in her grief-driven suicide. Given all the noted peculiarities, we can now pay a closer attention to the later complex variation in the motifs of Oedipus' fulfilment of his fate in relation to the advent of Apollo and his prophecies.

In Sophocles' treatment of the story Apollo has a central role because Laius, Jocasta and Oedipus seek help and prophecies from him at crucial points in their lives, which culminates in the series of fateful encounters. Their determination here, unlike that in previous tradition, is deeply concerned with knowledge of their individual as well as each other's lives, if only unconsciously related until the crucial juncture. But outside and both immediately before and after Sophocles, the situation is apparently very different.

First of all, there is hardly any evidence of an oracle given to or sought by Oedipus until Sophocles, which shifts the focus in the causal motivation and, indeed, his whole character from intellectual *hubris* or relentless thirst for truth into different psychological and necessarily geographical directions. For example, Gantz attests a reference to the scholia for Euripides' *Phoinissai* attesting a version (with a lost beginning) where Oedipus is found and adopted in Argos by Hippodameia, daughter of Oinomaos, who presents him to Pelops, instead of Polybus and Merope of Corinth, as his own son. When Laius, traditionally, appears in Pelops' house to abduct Chrysippus, Pelops' natural son and in this case assumed brother of Oedipus, the latter young man 'in trying to intervene kills his [unknown] father.' And 'when Iokaste arrives to claim the body, he then meets and marries her, thus completing the disaster' (Gantz 492).

Although, as Gantz notes, this version is only arguably an early one, it presents us with a remarkable ingenuity in the way in which the necessity of Pelops' curse on Laius and thus the traditionally known cause for Oedipus' exposure as an infant is obviated. As this version's beginning is lost, we will never know how Oedipus got to Hippodameia and Pelops in the first place. On the other hand, this version also emphatically lacks travelling to Delphi and the encounter with the Sphinx, suggesting that the final revelation should have come some other way – perhaps, much like the 'sudden' or 'swift' action of the gods in Homer's *Nekyia*. However, unlike Homer's version, Oedipus here is certainly not the passive victim of the misfortune engineered from above, but looks very much like the character in the *Iliad* and *Ehoiai* who is a loyal and ardent defender of those whom he considers his own family and his own city.

There is more than one account, including that in Euripides' *Phoinissai* and perhaps his lost *Oedipus* itself, of a definitely later-than-Homer Oedipus who kills Laius on the way to (and not after visiting) Delphi, thus still dissociating the prophetic doom and concern for knowledge from the plane of the hero's motives and resulting actions, while already putting him on the way to it. Oedipus here is always an outnumbered traveller who acts in self-defence and, though in Euripides he knows that he is dealing with a king, neither of the parties is warned by the oracles at the time of their encounter. Besides, Oedipus himself is a son of a king, in which case it is Laius who acts rather hubristically toward his unknown son and conspicuous nobleman, while Oedipus performs a feat of valour standing up to the outnumbering challenge. The *Phoinissai* scholia note here, as some other versions do, that after the killing, Oedipus brings Laius' horses back to Polybus, refusing to go on to Delphi and thus not receiving an oracle. As an explanation, the scholia say that '[Oedipus] felt he could not consult the god in his

polluted condition.’ Although Gantz here (493) doubts the authenticity of this note and says that no other source in the scholia supports it, the fact that scholiast could offer what resembles piety as a motive of Oedipus’ behaviour in the given context is rather remarkable in view of other contemporary and especially later interpretations of this myth. On the other hand, equally doubtful, Gantz notes, is another scholia note here that Oedipus obtained purification at Corinth, ‘back home’, and then went on to Delphi to receive the oracle. What is rather implied by the remnants of Euripides’ *Oedipus* is that Oedipus, once at Corinth after the murder of Laius, learned about Creon’s announcement of Jocasta’s hand in return for the victory over the Sphinx and went directly there in order to try out his luck and not in a terrified flight from his alleged parents Polybus and Merope (or Periboia, as Apollodoros and other late mythographers quoted by the scholia also call the wife of Polybus in this variant of the story).

Therefore, we could hardly expect the encounter with the Sphinx to be a half-conscious intellectual sacrilege, since Oedipus here is not the presumptuous ‘knowfoot’ of Goux, derived, mostly, from Sophocles. He again approaches the type of what Goux would consider rather a monomythic hero like Perseus, wanting to try out his strength and luck in freeing a woman and city from a monster. Here he is also quite passive in discovering the truth about his parentage, and, as the fragments of Euripides’ lost *Oedipus* suggest, it is Creon, aggrieved by the fate of his late brother-in-law and envious of Oedipus’ position who takes the lead in the search for truth. This brings us to the necessity to reconsider Oedipus’ role in the encounter with the Sphinx, which for Goux constitutes the profound epitome of the filiarchal deprojective autodidacticism of the hero.

At the level of narrative tradition (rather than anthropological research concerning the rites of initiation and the Sphinx's role in them, that would carry us beyond the verifiable data) the chief problem with relations between Oedipus and the Sphinx is that it is not actually attested either in art or myth until early to mid 5th century, that is Aeschylus' Theban trilogy (467 BC) and the famous Vatican cup 'on which Oedipous contemplates the creature as she perches on a column' (Gantz 494). The 'words *kai tri* [...] (*and three*-[footed?]), appearing on the cup between Oedipous and the Sphinx' in conjunction with the contemplative pose clearly suggest the famous riddle (Gantz 496). Aeschylus' lost *Sphinx* should have clearly dramatised the scene, while Sophocles' *Oedipus* never throws any light on the character of the encounter itself only alluding to the wording and solving of the riddle. Aeschylus' only reference to the episode in *The Seven Against Thebes* says simply that Oedipus' 'removed her', calling her, in Hesiodic fashion, 'the man-snatching bane' (ll.775-77).

Nevertheless, the Sphinx is certainly attested as early as late seventh and sixth centuries as 'the bane of Thebes' (Gantz 495) in *Theogony* and *Oedipodeia*. The art of the same period has numerous representations of her snatching naked unbearded youths, on two occasions picturing her flying and pursuing young men with one of them, not unlike Odysseus and his ram, either clawed to or hiding under her belly (as is seen on a Red-Figure lekythos in Kiel and the description of Parthenopaios' shield in Aeschylus' *The Seven*). That the Sphinx had any particular reason to pester Thebes is not attested until 5th century drama and the indication of her posing any riddles before snatching a youth does not appear until late 6th-early 5th century both in art and tragic poetry. Given her older fame as simply 'the bane' rather than a 'riddle-singer', Gantz quite logically surmises that, at first, she did not need any riddle or any other pretext to ravish a city.

Thus, not until Sophocles is it absolutely certain that the Sphinx did ask riddles of Thebans and not until Asclepiades of Samos (3rd century BC) the famous text of the riddle surfaces, quoted in dactylic hexameters. Gantz notes here (496) that this particular meter gives an ambiguous clue as to its origin: on the one hand, it certainly points towards an early epic source, such as *Oedipodeia*; on the other, Asclepiades is generally known to take his stories from tragedies and the dactylic hexameter is exactly the meter that was used to represent the riddles on stage. Aeschylus' *Sphinx* could almost certainly have provided an answer, but it, or any other tragedy, could also draw from an epic source itself.

Finally, and, most importantly, neither early epic nor tragedy is clear on the exact way in which the Sphinx was 'removed'. Aeschylus' extant texts do not specify anything; Sophocles implies that it had something to do with answering the riddle. Euripides' text does not say anything other than to imply a wording of the riddle different from the 'classic' Asclepiades' one (reproduced also by Athenaeus roughly around the same time), thus pointing to some unknown earlier source. And this is precisely where the modern reader, such as Goux or indeed any other analyst, feels compelled to resort to various sorts of associative conflation.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the complex identity problem of the protagonist and, especially, the enigmatic pronouncements of Teiresias are positively related to the Asclepiades/Athenaeus version of the riddle about:

two-footed, four-footed and three-footed upon the earth,
it has a single voice, and alone of those on land or in the air or sea
it changes form. And when it goes supported on its most number of feet,
then the speed of its limbs is the weakest. (Gantz 496)

However, as to the victory over and especially the downfall of the Sphinx, nothing positive is suggested by Sophocles. Oedipus, of course, quotes his victory as a proof of his own, as opposed to the divinely inspired, intellect in the quarrel with Teiresias. Here lies one of the cornerstones of Goux's argument that having overcome the Sphinx verbally, intellectually, and without the help of the gods, Oedipus offends her into an ignominious suicide as well as the gods into a dreadful retribution.

Sophocles, that is, Goux's main point of reference, does not actually say anything about the Sphinx's suicide. Moreover, given the rather volatile temper which Oedipus showed in defending himself against Laius (and which example Goux invests with the enormous symbolic value of a criminal upsurge of filiarcal violence), it should not be, on the one hand, a great exaggeration to suppose that Oedipus might have used violence as well as verbal intelligence against the Sphinx as well. On the other hand, if the offence against this sacred monster was as great as Goux suggests and if the Sphinx was indeed the wild 'savage-jawed maiden' (as called by Pindar, Sophocles' older contemporary) ravaging youths on 6th century cups, she could have also been the one to try and revenge herself on the shameless wit in her usual manner – that is, forcing Oedipus to confront her in a physical combat. Nevertheless, the author of *Oedipus, Philosopher* prefers to believe that the Sphinx threw herself off the cliff to her death – a strange death, indeed, for a winged creature whose flying abilities are attested at least by Aeschylus and Kiel art representation. Be that as it may, this version of Oedipus' dealing with the Sphinx and her death as suicide comes to us explicitly only with Palaiphatos in the fourth century, which could again indirectly corroborate Goux's understanding of the situation in Sophocles 5th century drama or have nothing to do with it. Finally, according to Gantz, a late fifth (rather than fourth) century Red-figure squat lekythos (a wide oil

flask) provides a representation much closer in time to the creation and production of Sophocles' tragedy where Oedipus, indeed, 'aims a spear at a cowering or collapsed Sphinx' (Gantz 497) with a column in the background from which the Sphinx was most probably knocked off or had fallen.

Which was or is, then, the true Oedipus? Looking back at all the bits of evidence that have been assembled here from early and later sources, with Oedipus as a warrior, honoured at his demise, a ruler and defender of the relatives, a youth eager to try out his strength and luck with monsters, arguably unconcerned with his parentage, oracles or truth until it 'presently/suddenly' strikes him, one would perhaps not find it difficult to realise that the difference between 'mono-' and 'deviant' myths is much more ambiguous and is hardly intrinsic to the mythic tradition.

Various critics have certainly found their respective ways of dealing with this heterogeneity, using it to construct an interpretative pattern to the best of their understanding. To come back to the Sphinx once again, we should note that the remarkable point in Goux's treatment here was to move away from the classical poetic sources that invariably associate her with disaster and pestilence to later ancient and modern mythographers who present the Sphinx as presiding over initiation rites. There, she is, according to Goux, imported by Cadmos, the mythical founder of Thebes, from Egypt to ensure the proper royal investiture of his line of descent. And as the ancient pre-historical idea of initiation was rather based on the ritual death-and-rebirth cycle, one had to succumb to the monster, offering pious silence as the answer to the riddle, in order to be ravished and then reborn. Sophocles' *Oedipus* is presented in these accounts as equidistant or rather turning from this ancient tradition and the subsequent modern

one that, allegedly, abolishes the mysteries of initiation for the practice of perpetual revolt and tyrannical democracy.

But even in this seemingly justifiable reading of the Sphinx's role in ancient culture and, perhaps, the Oedipus myth, there is a considerable omission of the variation in the tradition. Goux here, as well as in most of his argument, himself performs, as it were, an Oedipal feat of foreshortening myth for the sake of a chosen philosophical 'perspective' (which is also his symbol-word, designating the deprojective-humanistic transformation of representation in favour of the individual as opposed to the divine, 'aspective', that is, 'non-looking/searching' point of view). This feat becomes particularly clear when one comes across Pausanias' account of the Oedipus myth (2nd century BC) which, on the one hand, is very much in line with Goux stating that the Sphinx did actually preside over the royal initiation in Thebes and that the riddle came to her via Cadmos who got it from the Delphic oracle. On the other hand, however, according to Pausanias (Gantz 498), the Sphinx here is not the mythic triadic monster but an illegitimate daughter of Laius to whom he had confided the riddle. When he died, it was she (not Creon or Jocasta) who ruled in Thebes using the riddle to ward off and, probably, destroy all other illegitimate male claimants to the throne, thus performing her usual 'man-snatching' role. But, unfortunately for Goux, the Oedipus of this version succeeds in quite a monomythic way by learning the answer to the riddle in an oracular dream after many others have been 'eaten' by his half-sister. The same Pausanias (as well as Pherecydes of Syros, a 6th century BC philosopher), in line with Hesiodic and Homeric tradition, specifies that there were no children between Oedipus and Jocasta, making Euryganeia Oedipus' second wife and mother of his children. Also, a very early source, Epimenides, the Cretan poet and prophet of the 6th century BC who is later

known to rid Athens of impurity after the murder of Cylon (640 BC) that resulted in a plague besetting the city, names Eurycleia, according to the *Phoinissai* scholia, as wife of Laius and mother of Oedipus. He does not clarify the point whether Oedipus eventually marries her or Jocasta, his step-mother in this case, with whom Laius refuses to have any children because of the oracle (which is, at least, not the case in the *Phoinissai* itself). By way of conclusion at this point, it should be noted that the tradition in which Oedipus appears very close to what Goux would regard as a properly initiated, monomyth hero and ruler is unmistakably present in the variants of the myth, however fragmented their current state might be.

If we need any further evidence for the complex ambiguity of relations between the 'monomythic' Jason, Perseus, Bellerophon, and the 'deviant' Oedipus, we should bear in mind that every one of the first three heroes, following as they might the 'normal' tripartite course of initiation by the 'exposer-dispatcher-donor' kings, as well as the parallel progression from the maternal to non-maternal female through a bloody combat with a female monster with the necessary help of the gods, end up in a very Oedipian way. Jason insults Medea, the helper-mediator of the gods, and has himself or his children treacherously killed by her. In other versions he serves only as an unwitting vehicle to bring her to rule in Corinth. Perseus offers to go after the Gorgon's head only after Polydectes promises that he will not take Perseus' mother Danae as wife until Perseus returns. After he accomplishes the deed, he normally petrifies Polydectes and all his court, taking his mother away to their homeland, sometimes even *without* his new wife Andromeda. At the end, he quite significantly organises or at least takes part in a five-fold competition involving his grandfather and the exposer-king Acrisios whom he *unwittingly* kills when throwing a discus that is believed to be carried off its course *by*

the gods and hits the grandfather exactly on his *foot* (from which accident the grandfather quite uncannily dies in order to fulfil the oracle that he will be killed by his grandson). Bellerophon, whose very name is actually a nickname meaning 'the one who killed Belos' (his brother), performs all possible sorts of combat feats on the *winged* horse-creature Pegasus only to presume at the end that he is now fit to dine with gods themselves on the lofty Olympus. Before reaching the Olympus' peak, Bellerophon is either thrown off by Pegasus due to Zeus' trick or falls off the horse himself after having looked down. As a result of this crashing fall, he becomes *blind, lame, accursed*, and disappears *roaming as a beggar*.

What is to be made of all this mythical variation when Oedipus in his myth will still remain the one who kills his father and almost invariably marries his mother, while not always being either the agent of the final discovery or the one who loses sight, wealth and position, and again not always producing incestuous posterity? The simplest answer that should reveal, at least, one essential proposition behind this introductory comparative analysis of the mythic tradition is that Oedipus' presentation as the deviant proto-philosopher by Goux must undoubtedly be a particular and, for that matter, not earlier than late 5th century product. Goux would certainly not argue with this because his study speaks about the same in the groundbreaking civilisational revolution in 5th century Greece that dispelled the previous tradition. He would also probably wonder at the purpose of this analysis which while trying to oppose his views seems hesitant about redefining the deviant character of Oedipus at this point in favour of, for example, a monomythic hero.

However, for us it is much more important to see and even insist that it is precisely Goux, and to a certain extent later philosophy, that chose to appropriate

Oedipus as their 'deviant' symbol and thus turn his myth into a deviation, despite the available evidence. It is this appropriation that tends to put him into a modern rationalist perspective, minimising his not too negligible affinity with the previous problematically mythopoeic culture steeped in the dramatic presence of the irrational.

Whether Sophocles' *Oedipus* indeed denies the centrality of the irrational or is a victim of a recent analytical rationalisation will be one of the chief topics of the following analysis of the play. As post-script to this part, we can say that the logic of death and rebirth ritual, that is the destructive regeneration, to which Goux appeals, does not seem to alienate or preclude deviation as its mode, or even as its ultimate result. It is virtually the way in which myth in its attempt to discover and propel itself onto a new level subsists, through endless variation and straying. Its action appears to be essentially directed not only onto the victim-subject of initiation who is to be destroyed and reborn but, more importantly, onto its own self. A more accurate vision of the ontology of myth, in our opinion, is thus expressed by Frank Boas (and also Lévi-Strauss quoting him) who says that

'It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments.' (Lévi-Strauss 206)

2.2 'I, famous to all, Oedipus-by-name.'

The founding concern of all the influential studies on Sophocles' *Oedipus*, whether predominantly philological or more interdisciplinary, is to come to some clear terms with what is perceived in the play as Oedipus' tragedy. It is not only due to the extreme poignancy of the presented events, which would be characteristic of many other great tragedies. In the specific case of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, its intense focus on finding the true answers, which is central to the tragic reversal, both induces a perception of truth but also essentially problematises the very notion through its revelation as a specific negative, 'absent', or 'missed' presence in Oedipus' whole experience. Thus, on the one hand, the general and critical audience feels impelled, or in Laplanchean terms, seduced, to extract truth from the play but also becomes specifically alert and uncertain about the validity and feasibility of this imperative and its potential results. The truth here emerges not as a straightforward, univocal directive but as an *aporía*, 'something we don't know that we know', an *árrētos*, 'something we cannot say' (the word with which Oedipus hails Teiresias' entrance) – and yet also something we 'must hear', *akoustéon* (Oedipus' word of injunction to the old Shepherd to tell the horrible, already suspected truth at l.1170). This impossibility of truth in the play, a matter both calling for and defying its own interpretation, is what culminates throughout the drama and what, apparently centered on the protagonist's experience, invariably tends to unsettle the rest of the dramatic personae, the audience, and, thus most importantly, the truth's very contours.

What is to be made of Oedipus? – Laius and Jocasta seem to have asked themselves after the prophecy Jocasta refers to at l.711 'came' to Laius ('*ēlthe Laiō*')

from Apollo's 'servants' ('*hupēretōn*' 1.712). This appears to be the first and exemplary moment the story of Oedipus enters the tragic sphere, which complexly mirrors the impact it must have had on Sophocles and his contemporary and subsequent audience. In both cases, though in different senses, the prophecy/story proves inassimilable and is expelled into the prophetic obscurity it has 'come' (*ēlthe*) from – that is, onto the mountain, onto the theatrical stage, into critical debate, and, also dreams (as Plato and Freud would suggest). The expulsion of Oedipus resulting from confrontation with his prophecy/story marks the beginning of Laius and Jocasta's tragedy. The confrontation with the same question proves equally impossible for the – then young and now – old Shepherd, which makes him hand the baby with pierced ankles over to another shepherd from Corinth so that he does not have to 'do away with' (*analōsaimí*, 1174, related to 'analyse') the baby nor leave him and his prophecy within his land. This, certainly, in both cases, while apparently driving the prophecy away, leaves its permanent trace in those who confront it, which effectively turns them into facets of its truth. In view of this prophecy and truth dynamic, the question is what is to be made of the connection between their rejection and return.

What is to be made of me? – Oedipus asks his Corinthian parents after the drunk banqueter lets out that Oedipus '*plastós ōs eiēn patri*' ('was a counterfeit [son] of [his] father', 780). With this question and Polybus and Merope's failure to produce a convincing answer, the tragedy enters Oedipus' as well as their life to the extent that they lose their only son.³⁶ Apollo himself gives the impression of being exasperated

³⁶ The phrasing of the reported drunken taunt suggests that Polybus did not know that Oedipus was not his son by birth. This seems to be further corroborated by the fact that on his deathbed he apparently sends the messenger who makes his fatal appearance at 1.924 to call Oedipus 'back home' to take over the throne of Corinth. The Corinthian theme in *Oedipus*' plot thus reflectively elaborates the ironic absent presence of

when confronted with his own truth in the face of young Oedipus who came to question him about his parentage. He '[sends] [Oedipus] away/ dishonoring [his] demand. Instead, other /wretched horrors he flashed forth in his speech' (Gould, 788-90, pp.99-100).³⁷ Apollo is unable to answer Oedipus' question with an explanatory truth; he chooses to 'flash forth', *profainein*, as a *daimon* does in the absolute *jouissance* of self-manifestation.³⁸ It is the major indication that either in the form of prophecy given to Laius or Oedipus, or in the form of Oedipus' question to Apollo, the truth remains inassimilable and asynchronic with regards to any given moment of utterance. This is reflected in the resulting paradox of Oedipus' crucial vow to remain a true son without finding out the truth about his parents and himself. This very determination to deny the prophecy, however, paves Oedipus' way towards Thebes, that is, towards its fulfilment. After he leaves Delphi, he meets and kills an old man with a small retinue, disposes of the Sphinx ravaging Thebes, marries the local widow-queen and produces four children in the succeeding years. This prophecy-fulfilling cluster of events, whose recapture is emphatically drawn together at the very center of Sophocles' play, corroborates the impression of the nature of truth which can be seen in the dealings between Laius and Jocasta, young Oedipus and Apollo observed before. The truth of the prophecy/story takes effect only insofar as it is denied, expelled, and missed.

However, Sophocles' play proper which has all the above mentioned events as background, also suggests that the truth is partitioned and manifests itself in at least three crucial hypostases: first, when it comes to be denied/expelled as impossible and

truth, where Polybus wished to see the son he never knew he did not have, while Jocasta in the end cannot bear to see the son she never knew she had.

³⁷ Apollo's apparent refusal to answer the question directly is one of the central mysteries of the plot. It is rendered flagrant by the fact that his answer to Creon's query is much clearer.

³⁸ Or as the sudden beacon at the beginning of *Agamemnon*.

thus sets out on its path; second, when it is consummated through the freedom and honest determination of ignorance by the missing parties; and third, when it returns, 'unexpectedly', 'flashing forth' as a revelation. In the play we have accounts of the first and the second stages while the action itself is mostly concerned with the third, 'unexpected' (*para-doxos*) return stage dramatising the reversal of the denial and missing of the prophecy fulfilment by all the characters. The problem with the third stage, as the play appears to show, is that the realisation of this fulfilment does not dissolve the paradox of the prophecy's negated nature in the previous two stages. The energy of the well-intended denial and determination of ignorance to carry it through, when it reaches the point of the 'unexpected return' of the denied, proves a devastating and uncontrollable force as it 're-turns', i.e. literally turns back on its own master: Jocasta rushes into the palace and hangs herself followed shortly by Oedipus who blinds himself, unable to bear the sight of the newly revealed truth even after death. This moment of revelation and its affective consequences provide a violent reiteration of the prophecy not only for the main characters but also and necessarily for the audience both on and off stage.

This crucial shift in perspective is emphatically projected by the Chorus in the last seven lines of the play. There have been disputes about the origin and value of these lines which scholiasts and various interpreters felt were detracting from the quality of the preceding material. Nevertheless, the final words of Sophoclean Chorus are very much in line with the preceding treatment of the Oedipus myth; they tie together the key issues relying on the most significant word-images in the play and offer their final pronouncement on the problem of excellence, knowledge, destiny and belonging as an

ultimate existential challenge (full of ironic echoes, especially of Oedipus' opening speech):

People of Thebes, my country, see: here is that Oedipus –
he who “*knew*” the famous riddle, and attained the *highest power*,
whom all citizens admired, even envying his *luck*!
See the *billows* of wild troubles which he has entered now!
here is the *truth* of each man's life: we must wait, and see his end,
scrutinize his dying day, and refuse to call him happy
till he has crossed the border of his life without pain.

(Gould, ll.1524-30, quotation marks original, italics

added)

This is as far as inability to accept oneself logically gets in the play dedicated to systematic undermining of one's identity. The paradox of 'happiness' informing Sophocles' *Oedipus* still remains a starting point for all major investigations of the play and its related tradition, which more often than not try to resolve it in terms of some fallacy of the understanding of the initial conditions. Is this paradox a genuine ontological given or the result of individual *hamartia* in judgment? What is the role and nature of expectations that are at work in the tragic genre and what is the degree and nature of reversal with which they meet at the end? The following will be a close analysis of the play focused not only on these major questions as such but on their evolution through the intricate exchange of questions and answers in every scene.

Any question always stipulates the terms of its expected answer and, normally, suggests, at least, approximately, the distance between the two. The relations of proximity between questions and answers as well as between characters and the plot in Sophocles' *Oedipus* suggest much less certainty and appear to follow an altogether

peculiar regularity, which surfaces immediately in the question of Oedipus' opening address³⁹.

Appearing before the suppliants at the doors of his palace, Oedipus asks them:

My children, ancient Cadmus' newest care,
why have you hurried to those seats, your boughs
wound with the emblems of the suppliant?
the city is weighed down with fragrant smoke,
with hymns to the Healer and the cries of mourners. (Gould, 1-5)

The very first line is loaded with complex oppositions and overtones. Its Greek original, 'Ὁ τέκνα, Κάδμου του πάλαι νέα τροφή', allows for multiple ambiguity in attribution of what Gould translates as 'newest care' (*néa trophē*) as compared to Jebb's somewhat less precise 'latest-born' and the overtly explicative 'latest to be reared' of Lloyd-Jones. The conjunction of 'children' (*tékna*) here with '*néa trophē*' can explicitly mean that Theban descendants of Cadmus are cared for presently by Oedipus *and* by the 'ancient Cadmus'. Implicitly, this approximation between Oedipus and Cadmus here is certainly more than merely contingent.

Trophē is interesting here because, as Jebb suggests in a somewhat puzzled way, it seems to mean, contrary to the reality, that 'Cadmus is still the *tropheús*' ('foster-father', 'one who brings up', Liddell and Scott⁴⁰). Lewis Campbell in his 1879 translation of the line – 'my latest-born care derived from ancient Cadmus' – as well as Lloyd-Jones understand that the *tropheús* is Oedipus. The attempt at clear semantic and

³⁹ The fact that we rely on the Oedipus myth for amplification of the suggestions in the play's language is normal and indeed necessitated by the original design since tragedies were composed for and performed in front of those who knew the myths all along, despite the insistence of critics like Ahl and Goodhart on a sort of abstract, 'new critical', approach to the play for the sake of questioning the truth of Oedipus' final discovery. However, the truth in the play is questioned only insofar as it is related to the myth, which is why we cannot and do not need such an abstraction for better appreciation.

⁴⁰ From now on referred to as LS

relational distinctions and thus at separate attribution of 'care' and 'origin' of Thebans miss the inherent ambiguity of the Greek words *tropheús* and *trophē* that refer both to 'caring/upbringing' and 'breeding' which allows Oedipus' desire to approximate himself as much as possible to the Theban royal line of 'descent' by virtue of his 'care'. – thus outlining the contours of his dominant fantasy. At the level of our interpreting consciousness and myth, this fantasy of 'care' and 'breeding' acquires a third, ironic, realisation since, unlike Oedipus, we are aware of his literal status as Cadmus' descendant and carer.

Besides, *trophē* is not only used as an abstract substitute meaning 'brood' for which the concrete equivalent in Greek is *thrémata*; it also means 'nourishment, provision; that which provides nourishment' (LS). Thus at an even deeper unconscious level; Oedipus in his addressing the populace of Thebes as 'my... newest care' figures them as, as it were, the most recent part of the generational provision which he (at this point) secretly lacks and longs to partake of, considering himself a Corinthian foreigner with doubtful origins, that is 'uncared'-for.

Based on this multiple ambiguity of 'care', the larger impression one can get from Oedipus' opening lines is of a contradictory nature. Showing himself as a caring ruler in his address, Oedipus clearly does not want his people to have such a distressing occasion as 'the city weighed down with fragrant smoke, /with hymns to the Healer and cries of mourners' (4-5, Gould) to appear at his palace in recognition of his power and proximity to the Cadmeians. The 'weight'/heaviness of the 'ship' of the city here is not only a 'daring' metaphor, as Gould says, because *thumiamáton*, 'fragrant smoke', does not only refer to incense but to that which is '[capable of] giving off smoke' (LS) – that is, funeral pyres and thus the corpses of those dying in the plague. On the other hand, it

is in such conditions as these that Oedipus can really assume the desired degree of proximity to the role of the native caring king, which for him carries necessarily a much more sinister connotation. The point is that his first '*Ō tékna*', reiterated five lines later, does not only put him in the position of an elder addressing his juniors in the persona of Cadmus, the Theban proto-father. In Attic tragedy – for example, in the plays based on the House of Atreus tradition – the word *teknon* for 'child' was specifically associated with mother and begetting as opposed to *pais* related to father as well as instruction and domination ('*Agamemnonos pai kai Klutaimēstras teknon*', Euripides, *Iphigeneia Taurica*, 298, qtd. in LS). Oedipus' repeated *tékna* (rendered by Gould as 'I thought it wrong, *my sons*, to hear your words/ through emissaries' at 1.6) in conjunction with the ambiguity of the *trophē* comes, therefore, to suggest not only Oedipus' extreme concern and care towards the suppliants but, on the unconscious level, his reaching towards the maternal side of 'care', *as well as* the paternal one embodied in Cadmus, as he would like to see himself both legitimized and engendered by the royal power in Thebes. Thus, unlike the ending of *Eumenides* where child-engendering (and *teknon*) is ostensibly pronounced to belong to and invoke the father's prerogative, the beginning of Sophocles' Oedipus in its overt invocation of the father and paternal relation, uncannily invokes the repressed maternal proximity which will play the decisive role in Oedipus' paradoxical realisation of his fate and patricide.

However, at the given moment, Oedipus, moved, tantalized, dismayed, and implicated by the encounter with his yet unknown compatriots, asks a more obvious question: why have they come as suppliants to *him* when in the times of such deadly troubles as the current plague their normal destination should have been the Delphic

shrine of Apollo (as numerous interpreters and his own actions point out)? He makes a point of his wonder and care, coming out to them in person:

I thought it wrong, my sons, to hear your words
through emissaries, and have come out myself,
I, Oedipus, a name that all men know.
Old man – for it is fitting that you speak
for all – what is your mood, as you entreat me,
fear or trust? You may be confident
that I'll do anything. How hard of heart
if an appeal like this did not rouse my pity! (Gould, ll.6-13)

We will certainly have to wait for the priest's words to understand the full import of the suppliants' appearance, for Oedipus, though his words are consciously directed at his subjects with self-abnegatory concern, keeps revolving within the uncertainty of his own ancestral fantasy, which acquires a new key element. In line with his previous wooing of the 'foreign'-'foster' Theban paternity, Oedipus appeals to the old man, the priest, to 'speak for the rest' (*prō tōnde phōnein*) without hesitation as he, literally, 'would be willing to give all aid' (*ōs thélontos an emou prosarkein pân*) even before he knows why they have actually come. To find it out he uses, as Gould notes, 'slightly odd', but also, as it turns out, uncannily pertinent words, '*deisantes ê stérxantes*', rendered by Gould as 'fear or trust' (by Jebb as 'dread or...desire' and by Lloyd-Jones as 'fear or...longing').

The meaning of *stérxantes* here has been especially a matter of prolonged dispute, which, as is often the case in this play, does not preclude but promote the understanding of the play's complex reality in the uncovered polysemy. Jebb explains his choice of (literally) 'having formed a desire' as the equivalent for the word out of the possible 'having acquiesced' and 'content' (which he cites as the version of Professor

Kennedy) as based on the subsequent reply of the priest as well as the general situation in which it seems highly unlikely that people have come to Oedipus to ask for something having already 'acquiesced' or become 'content' with their suffering or fear. 'Desire' and 'fear' seem much more natural, although not very clear, motives behind people's appearance in which view Gould's rendering of *stérxantes* as 'trust' forms, indeed, even an odder alternative to 'fear', as he himself admits in the comment to the line. His choice of 'trust' as the English equivalent seems all the more strange as he also says in the same commentary that 'having formed a desire' would be much more natural here, while Liddell and Scott give precisely such a translation of this passage in Sophocles' *Oedipus* while not mentioning 'trust' at all in the whole article on *stergō* (-*ein*), the verb base of *stérxantes*. The closest the article gets to 'trust', however, is its rendering of *stergō* as referring to 'love, affection...freq. of the mutual love between parents and children; subjects and rulers; believers and gods; city and her colonies; wheedling demagogues and people; dogs and masters; [finally] brothers, sisters, and friends'. Modified by this very specific and multifarious understanding, 'trust' would be indeed very apposite in Oedipus' parental fantasy pervading the first part of the scene as he perceives the suppliants as frightened children who came out of loyal/familial or even abject love/desire to be ruled into order again.

Although such a reading of this phrase may seem too overdetermined, this is not all that can be said about the meaning of *stérxantes* and *deísantes* at this juncture.

Another crucial level at which these two words work together in the context of Oedipus' parental uncertainty is their evocation of Oedipus many years before, himself as a suppliant at Delphi, with 'desire' and then added 'fear' to find out the truth about his parents. The beginning of the play, taking place many years after that incident, seems to

bring that moment back unconsciously into Oedipus' mind evoking the key element in his as well as suppliants' desire: Apollo. He seems to be the one who directs Oedipus to go out of the palace himself, 'not through emissaries', in order to assume the role of the ruling father and child in Thebes (which he would fear to do in Corinth). Apollo is also the one who seems to have made the people of Thebes turn to Oedipus for help for the second time in their history.

To sum up the ambiguity of his relations to the people, ancestry, and Apollo, Oedipus puts himself at the centre of all this intricate relationship by using what would elsewhere seem a harmless straightforward formula of designating one's status. Making a point of going out to the suppliants in person, Oedipus, as Gould translates it, says 'I...have come out myself,/ I, Oedipus, a name that all men know'(8). The English variant tries hard here to approximate the peculiar sense of alienation between the 'I' of Oedipus and his name, both internal and external. What Gould renders as 'know' in English is actually comprised of a more complex two-word relation which would probably be too much for English to accommodate in one line. Literally, Oedipus says 'I.../ famous to all Oedipus-by-name' (*'hagō.../ho pāsi kleinòs Oidípous kalóúmenos'*). The last word, *kalóúmenos*, is the centre of meaning and ambiguity here since it does not simply mean 'called/named/by name', but also is a participle from the verb *kalein* meaning 'to summon before court' which is what Oedipus is going to do to himself in the course of the play and what the populace, unwittingly, has also come to do precisely because of his being 'famous' (*kleinòs*). Anticipating in this way the final point of the play, *kalóúmenos/kalein* relates to the beginning of Oedipus' quest and signifies the intervention of and turn to Apollo at the moment in his life when the drunk man 'calls' (*kalei*, historic present) Oedipus 'a false son of his father'. The verb also means, when

applied to designating interpersonal relations, 'consider', 'define' (LS), which makes Sophocles' phrase in question sound also like 'I, whom all so famously consider Oedipus'. This last overtone, already reaching beyond the play into myth and subsequent interpretations, further emphasizes the ironic distancing between knowledge/name and its object in the minds of Oedipus and his suppliants (with the former on a more conscious level because of his anxious doubts about his parentage). The distinctly Apollonian attribution of all this complex interplay on the themes of belonging, desired and unsuspected proximity, which will become more and more prominent in the play, is thus cryptically inscribed in these opening lines introducing the two daimonically opposite sides of the god – the Healer who has (as it were, homeopathically) sent a plague to the city in order to rid it of pollution which he, as the Oracle that stands behind Oedipus' 'famous' name, is largely responsible for.

2.3 'There is a [...] creature upon earth...'

If Oedipus' opening speech is more dominated by the ironic fantasy of replacing the real but daimonically foreclosed Corinthian ancestry with the adoptive but much wanted Theban one, the explicit purpose of the suppliants in the second part of the same scene shows more conscious hesitation as to what exactly they want from Oedipus.

Their leader, the priest, says that the people do not want anything from him only but rather his help as an intermediary between the city and the *daimon* ('*daimonōn sunallagais*' (1.34)) which, as they believe, is the source and essence of the plague besetting their city. As Gould notes at 1.31, immediately before the above-quoted phrase, the priest's speech echoes Oedipus' expression of confusion in his opening question/invitation with a 'rather tortured apology'. What he refers to is the extraordinary nature of the situation where the priest of Zeus comes as a suppliant to an earthly king for help in the *daimonic* matters, while the usual procedure would involve exactly the opposite order of supplication.

This case, however, is certainly the famous (as Oedipus calls himself) exception explained by the priest's reference to his king's extraordinary saving of the city from the Sphinx years ago 'without learning anything from us or without proper learning/schooling' ('*huph' hēmōn oudèn exeidōs pléon/ oud' ekdidachtheus*', 37-8) – 'it is, however, with god's assistance, it is said and believed, that you raised/set right our life' ('*allà prosthēkē theou/ légei nomizei th' hēmìn orthōsai bíon*' 38-9). Later, quarreling with Teiresias over the same 'famous' matter, Oedipus will insist that he did that by *gnōmē*, 'thought/intelligence', only. The belief expressed by the priest here does not in the least discount or contradict Oedipus' later assertion. The people admire and

honour Oedipus for proving lucky or more precisely 'having a good *daimon*' which his brilliance, courage, and care for the city in the confrontation with the Sphinx were for them the obvious signs. The Sphinx and the plague, according to the contemporary views, belonged to the '*daimonōn sunallagē*', which stands both for the 'dealings with the divine' and 'visitations of the divine', and in both, of course, with more irony than is acknowledged at the present moment, Oedipus famously proved to be '*andrōn de prōton*' (33), 'the foremost of men'.

This explicit and major reason for the suppliants to appear before Oedipus' palace, of whose desperate strangeness they are aware, also develops the same ironic distortions of proximity and distance between the knowledge and its object which we saw working in Oedipus' opening speech. This development is working to show how deeply the Sphinx and the plague are the same matter and how deeply the same is the man and the *daimon* they relate to. The import of the priest's speech points with more suggestion to the three levels of *daimonic* influence commonly designated as a calamitous visitation (the Sphinx, the plague); as a name or characteristic of any divinity particularly when its identity, motives, and involvement in one's life are not well-understood; and, finally, as a guiding principle, an internalised divinity of a person, his other, immortal self. Gould's description of these levels in relation to *Oedipus* as a play about discovering 'the real relation between Oedipus and his *daimon*' in all its three-fold capacity is very apposite here, except for the reservation which the term 'real' acquires in its course. Because, despite the veering of the unconscious/*daimon* towards the surface, what remains to be re-examined is the actual content on both sides of the line between the two spheres, and in particular the elusive and shifting character of the line itself.

The three-fold presence of the *daimon* and the Sphinx as its particular sign develops the introductory interplay of hints in Oedipus' opening monologue into a major historical theme from the very first lines of the priest's speech. He hails Oedipus as 'Ὀκράτουνόν [...] χόρας ἐμῆς' (14) rendered by Jebb as 'ruler of my land' and by Gould as '[you Oedipus] who holds power here'. At the end of the speech, at l.54, there appears a discreet but also prominent opposition between 'κράτειν' (the verbal root for *kratunōn*), meaning 'hold in power by sway, might, excellence', and 'ἀρχεῖν' implying power through 'primacy, belonging, tradition': literally, after calling Oedipus the 'ruler/holding power' at the beginning, the priest ends his appeal with something like 'if you are to be/stay (a real) ruler (*arxeis*) of this land, even as you hold power here now ('*krateis*'), it is better to hold power ('*kratein*') [over this land] with men than over a waste' (54-55). The priest is hardly advancing some restrictive conditions or reproaches to Oedipus' power in Thebes; on the other hand, there is no secret or question about Oedipus' non-*archē* rule at the moment because everyone knows him as a foreigner. But trying as the priest is to inspire Oedipus to prove once again his reputation as the city-saviour with the apparently innocent *archein-kratein* combination, which on the syntactical surface of the line look more like synonyms than antonyms, the priest unconsciously strikes a very powerful chord with Oedipus' parentage and identity problem. Set thus as innocently factual and also seductive supplicatory terms, these key words in the priest's speech respond and present themselves in perfectly stimulating kind to Oedipus' opening ancestral fantasy of longing to find in Thebes the missing part of his excellency (*kratē*), that is, his primacy and belonging (*archē*).

The unconscious and the *daimonic* are never too far from each other here. The exact way in which the priest's speech offers Oedipus an opportunity to turn from

'*kratē*' to '*archē*' is ominously filled with unsettling suggestions concerning the doing-away with the Sphinx through answering (literally, 'unraveling') her riddle – which indeed, unknowingly, opened then for Oedipus the literally direct way towards his *archē*. Neither Jebb nor Gould draws enough attention to the *kratē-archē* opposition and the desire/seduction relation in the priest's speech whose message resembles a maternal call: 'be closer and dearer, as a true Theban-born would be (*archē*), putting your excellence/power (*kratē*) to saving us once again' – which is what Oedipus exactly longs for himself. Jebb does not consider the opposition of the verbs in the speech meaningful, while Gould stresses the point of ambiguity of Oedipus' position as the one 'holding' and 'held by' the power, which is certainly extremely relevant but is not literal enough to reflect the meeting of maternal and filial desire in the verbal exchanges here. The problem of the identity of Oedipus' unconscious longing and relation to the particular Theban '*chōros*' (land as country, delimited space) as his *chthonos* (land as soil from which one springs) constitutes the untranslatable complex involving both Oedipus and the Theban people in their desire to return to the primal, pre-*daimonic*⁴¹, healthy, condition of *archē*. This desire, however, in both cases assumes also a strongly *daimonic* form, that of the riddle, thus tending towards its opposite – that is, an inevitable Sphinxian self-destruction on both sides.

Although the riddle itself is never cited in the play and there is evidence for it to have more than one version, the language and symbolism of Sophocles' *Oedipus* seems to draw emphatically on the imagery of Asclepiades/Athenaeus version whose translation was quoted in the previous section and which is going to be quoted now in

⁴¹ which proves to be, indeed, *daimonic*, or even, as it were, 'always already' post-*daimonic* at the end of the play

full together with its original Greek text so that we could have a closer look at its correspondences with Sophocles' text:

*Esti dípoun epì gēs kai tetrápon, hou mía phōnē,
kai trípon· allásei dè phuēn mónon hóss' epì gaian
herpetà kineitai aná t' aithéra kai kata pónton.
all' hopótan pleístoisin ereidómenon posì bainē,
éntha tachos guíoisin aphaurótaton pélei auton. (Jebb 6)*

(There is a two-footed upon the earth and four-footed creature, who has a single voice and is also three-footed.
it changes shape alone of those on land or in the air or sea.
And when it goes supported on its most number of feet,
then the speed of its limbs is the weakest.)

Its central image of the adult (*dípoun*, two-footed) who is also a child (*tetrápon*, four-footed), with 'single voice' (*mía phōnē*), and also old man (*trípon*, three-footed) immediately springs to mind when the priest in his introduction points out to Oedipus the ages of the suppliants he is speaking for in his 'single voice' driven by the *daimon* of the plague: 'those not yet strong enough to fly far' ('*oi mèn oudépō makrán/ ptésthai sthénontes*', 16-17), 'those heavy with old age' ('*oi dè sùn gēra bareis*', 17), and 'those of the chosen unmarried youth' ('*oide t' ēthéōn lektoí*', 18-19). These, representing the land's regenerative cycle, its *archē*, implore and lure Oedipus into becoming their master-saviour once again almost exactly as the Sphinx did before – with the added irony that liberation of Thebes from her was the direct precursor of the current plague. The different syntax and metaphors in the supplication now emphasizing the young and old age as well as the inextricability of doom and escape (flying, heaviness of age, chosen-ness) is going to become the focus of the play's later revelations. In both cases Thebes is portrayed as bound, clenched in a grip, which is the meaning of the Greek '*sphiggein*', the generally disputed but here definitely relevant etymological verb root

for the word ‘Sphinx’⁴². If in the former case, as the priest informs us and reminds Oedipus, it was tied by the ‘*dasmos*’ (36), the ‘tax/tribute’ which Thebans were to ‘render’ (‘*pareichomai*’, *ibid.*) to the ‘harsh singer’ (‘*sklēras aoidou*’, *ibid.*), at present Thebes is described as ‘tossing’ (‘*saleuei*’, 23) as if in the grip of a deep (‘*buthōn*’, 24), deadly/bloodred (‘*phoiniou*’, *ibid.*) swell (‘*salou*’, *ibid.*), out of which it is unable to rise (‘*anakouphisai*’, 23).

The Athenian maritime connection of this extended metaphor has been considerably emphasized (e.g., by Bernard Knox) and is also apparently strengthened by the preceding mention of the ‘twin shrines of Pallas’ (‘*Palládos diplois naois*’, 21) which, according to both Jebb and Gould, should together with the ship/sea-metaphor have immediately reminded the Athenian public of the Erechtheum and Parthenos, the twin shrines of Athena overlooking the acropolis, ravaged by the plague and war during the time of the performance staged in the city priding herself on its seapower (*thalasson kratē*, Pericles).

However, the three-fold Sphinxian structure of the passage’s imagery proves no less strong an evocative pull, which with the mentioning of the third temple, the prophetic embers of Ismēnos (‘*Ismēnou mantéia spodō*’, 21), transports the picture out of Athens back to Thebes where Apollo’s shrine by the river Ismenus was also joined by the twin temples of Pallas, *Pallas Ogka* in West Thebes and *Athene Kadmeia* (or *Athene Ismenia*), mentioned by the scholiast to the play – to say nothing of the fact that the deadly swell gripping the Thebans can be perfectly embodied by the city walls.

⁴² Hesiod calls it *Phix* and quite a largely shared opinion holds it that it is neither a Greek nor Indo-European word, from which *sphiggein* may even be an inspired back-formation. Even if this is not true, the events in Thebes described in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* are certainly Sphinxian back-formations!

Developing this theme, the *daimonic* trinity in the priest's speech is substantially modified and complicated with a distinctly maternal implication evident in the description of the three-fold blight of Thebes that is 'withering in the fruits of its land, withering in its flocks, and fruitless labours of the women' ('*phthínousa mèn káluxin egkárpois chthonós/, phthínousa d'agélais bounomois tókoisi te/ agonois gunaikōn*', 25-27). At the same time, the overarching hypostasis of this blight is said to be the masculine 'fire-bearing god' ('*ho purphóros theòs*'), the hateful plague ('*loimòs échthistos*' (27-8)) that has 'swooped upon the city' (as with a staff or club-like weapon, LS) and 'harries/drives...the city', '*skēpsas elaunei...polin*' (28 – as a *daimon* would until the victim 'has had enough', LS). This is the first strong symbolic connection made in the play between the three-fold Sphinxian blight and the odd singularity of its *daimonic* staff-armed personification here. Like the tripartite creature under one voice of the riddle evoked by the priest's supplication for the three generations, the three-fold blight of Thebes is personified under a figure of a singular 'fire-bearing' *daimon* 'swooping' upon the city, as if with a staff. This heterogeneity, certainly, points to many later developments like the image of 'discovered' self-blinded Oedipus, but also to Apollo as the *daimon* who flashes forth (*profanein*) in his traditional role of the one who swoops (*skēptein*) upon a victim from afar. Also, in an ironic twist, it may be seen pointing to Prometheus with his fire-brand – and all three (again, the *daimonic* number) come to be reflected under the name of the native Theban Ares, which generalizes the blight as an ambiguous, both internal and external, foreign and native, self-reflexive, haunting condition. The chief puzzlement at the level of symbolic development here is the merger of the distinctly masculine personification and attribution of the blight with its three-fold manifestation as the ravager of the maternal, engendering function.

If we attempt to look into this puzzle from the point of view of Theban *daimonic* typology, the present situation suggests a perfectly symmetrical transformation of sex and orientation in the evoked *daimon*. In the first visitation, it was the traditionally triune but overall female Sphinx who came after the city's male youths (if this indeed was the tribute whose substance is never clarified in the play, while towards the end there is a strong impression that the Sphinx was there solely to accommodate Oedipus on the Theban throne). Now, the present visitation in the priest's description, which uncannily evokes the riddle in the previous one, is a masculine *daimon* in the form of plague that is after women and Thebes collectively as the three-fold mother of its offspring (the Greek word for 'Thebes', *Thēbai*, is plural feminine, and it is probably also relevant here to remember the characteristic multiple gates of the city, not prominent in this but in other Theban-set contemporary plays). Just like the creature in the riddle, the *daimon* visiting the city over the years appears to have multiple, coexistingly heterogeneous, '*phué*' which in the riddle translation quoted above is rendered as 'shape' but which can relevantly mean 'substance/nature' in the poetic language. The key riddling aspect of the *daimon* evoked in this scene (as well as of the creature in the riddle) is precisely the enigma of its heterogeneous coexistence with itself, the mode, reason, and condition of the changeability of its *phué*. The implicit question that the riddle is wondering at is what makes the creature change? how/why does it manage to do it 'alone of those on land or in the air or sea'? This wonderment acquires a sinister side when it becomes involved in the evocation of the Theban *daimon*. As it was signified in the previous sentence, quite a simple (some might say even childish) riddle with apparently a definite and fairly straightforward answer ('man') turns into what Laplanche in his theory of the unconscious and repression emphatically prefers to call 'enigma' (the Greek word for

'riddle') – the message 'proposed to the subject by another subject' ('Time and Other' 254) but which, unlike a riddle, exceeds and haunts conscious intellectual and psychic control of the parties involved.

A crucial indication of the sinister, 'enigmatic', link between the changeability of the riddle-creature/Theban persecutor-*daimon* and the act of engagement with and response to the riddle lies at the heart of the priest's supplication scene (and certainly looms increasingly large as the play progresses). The change in the shape/nature of the riddle creature becomes associated with the change and return of the *daimon* to Thebes in the priest's evocation of Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx. By way of explaining their extraordinary appeal, the priest reminds Oedipus of the time when he 'came to Cadmus' city and unbound the tax' (35-36) that they had to render to the 'harsh singer'. The Greek verb '*exélusas*' which Gould here renders as '*unbound*' is full of dramatic, indeed, *daimonic* connotations for the action it describes. Although the phrase does imply the solution of the riddle by Oedipus (referred to in different terms at ll.398 and 1197-200), it essentially relates only to the (unwittingly ominous) result of the answer, that is, literally, to 'loosening, unraveling' the *dasmus* ('tax', 'tribute') that, as Jebb says in his note on the use of *exélusas*, 'was as a knotted cord in which Thebes was bound' (n.35, 16). The act of 'loosening/unraveling' that in Greek is applicable both to riddles and literal knots has a crucial nuptial connotation referring to undressing, freeing the bride by the groom, which is what Oedipus certainly and crucially achieved. But in this particular situation and in relation to his particular bride what he also and simultaneously achieves is certainly an unconscious multiple *daimonic* reincarnation because by solving the riddle, by loosening the Sphinx's grip on Thebes, he unlocks the doors to Jocasta's bedchamber, both a royal consummation of his excellence (*kratē*), initiation into

procreative adulthood ('two-footedness') and, unwittingly, a *daimonic* return to his childhood ('four-footedness') and primacy (*archē*).

Daimonia, existence under/with/as a *daimon*, appears thus unavoidable in the context of the play, since facing the riddle does not really unravel it but makes those who attempt it assume its terms of existence. The enigma of the riddle (the uncanny mutual invasion of the *daimon* and human being) becomes a distinctive but also ambiguous attribute of the persona of the unraveler, Oedipus, making him 'famous to all' but at the same time not altogether assimilable either to himself or to the people. For the priest, the Chorus, and increasingly in his own mind, Oedipus (as a name and persona) curiously stands out as a peculiar defender, *daimonic* intermediary and visitation, now benign but later a source of pollution, foreign and immanently Theban – something they already chose and will again try to choose not to look into, as though under permanent if ironic Sphinxian persuasion to heed 'their feet', that is, something more real and urgent, as Creon will imply. This looking away is significantly set off by another indication of the *arche*-ambivalent symbolic merger of the Sphinx, Jocasta, and Thebes in relation to Oedipus and the *daimon* harrying them at ll.1197-200 where the Chorus, already after the revelations, refers to Oedipus' destruction of the Sphinx with the same word the priest uses now in his supplication to describe the plague 'withering' (*phthiein*) Thebes in its mothers, flocks and crops. Thus by ridding the city of the *daimon*, on which Oedipus prides himself, he is actually said, again literally and unconsciously, to take its place, role, and, here symbolically, even form in the city's ongoing generation crisis.

However, all these extremely suggestive verbal associations between Thebes, the Sphinx, the plague, Jocasta, Oedipus, and the *daimon* are completely unconscious at this

early stage. In fact, these connections are possible here as well as throughout the play only insofar as they are denied any conscious possibility and presence at all. Conversely, the drama is only made possible through reliance on their immense revealing and forbidding force that does not allow any conscious association between the protagonists and their *daimonic* counterparts. This force, which, as it were, oversees its own boundaries – simultaneously saving and killing, producing and reducing, loosening and binding, abandoning and leading, illuminating and blinding – is manifested, as we ventured to say at the beginning of this section, in a peculiarly dialectical character. It is peculiar because its mode of representative problematisation, albeit involving multiple oppositions, prefers a paradoxically non- and simultaneously pan-oppositional view of the opposites in which the presence of the latter is mutually inclusive rather than exclusive. Various heterogeneous features in the representation of the conflict are shown to coexist as components in a third, inclusive entity which pertains but is not equal or confined to their respective individual realities. Neither the symbolism nor the evoked reality in the play is absolute or originary; they are both made to bear witness to a third inclusive category of their uncanny, *daimonic*, relation. Unlike traditional dialectics, here we seem to be presented with a perpetual anxiety and deferral of synthesis not because of the irreconcilability of differences but precisely because of the anxiety over their distinctions. Thus, on the one hand, the play communicates a sense of anxious necessity to produce a definitive and conscious synthetic judgment about the order and relation of the opposites, and, on the other, it seems to be caught in an irresistible pull leading towards an ultimate, unconscious, hyper-synthesis, a collapse of all categories into, as it were, the terrifying one-ness of the *daimonic* real (which until the final moments remains at the level of unconscious wordplay).

2.4 The Killer(s) of Laius and Oedipus.

The multiplicity and singularity of the *daimon* as well as parental and protection anxieties, observed in the opening scenes, significantly develop in the subsequent scenes of Creon's arrival from Delphi, the ensuing first Chorus and interview with Teiresias. From the inchoate stage of subtle and deeply unconscious wordplay, these issues gain dramatic prominence in the problem that is to be raised in connection with the present *daimonic* crisis in Thebes. The problem is certainly none other than the murder of Oedipus' predecessor Laius as well as the identity and, particularly, the number of the murderers.

The conditions of introduction and the trajectory of development of this problem are critical for the direction of the conflict. For Oedipus and the rest of the dramatic personae, the oracular turn to Laius answers their deepest anxiety – the absence of the parental, or more exactly, paternal *archē* – and thus paves the way for its joint and also increasingly conflictual pursuit. For many interpreters, this moment is likewise the first major point of divergence. Some consider the emergence of Laius' murder in connection with the Theban plague as the unmistakable sign of the divine intervention, some consider it the beginning of Creon's coup d'état. Some, compellingly, define it as an 'imperative of initial situation' acting outside both personal and divine agencies (Knox 10).

Bernard Knox's is a compelling vindication of the latter point of view in relation, firstly, to the plague and with a lengthy emphasis on the importance of understanding Oedipus and *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the epitome of 'self-sufficient' Periclean spirit based

on full responsibility and free will⁴³ as opposed to (what Knox perceives as) the predestination approach of the Freudian-psychoanalytic inflection.⁴⁴ To refute the latter, Knox starts, quite paradoxically, with the first choral ode that *follows* the arrival of Creon and thus what can be considered the initial instance of divine intervention taking place within the action in the form of the divinely-announced cause and remedy for the plague – the polluting murder of Laius (*‘miasma...phonon’* ll.97, 100) and driving out or killing of his killer (*‘andrēlatoúntas, ê phónô phōnon pálin/ líontas’*, ll.100-1) respectively.

Unlike Oedipus, the Chorus in the first ode does not make any particular sense of Creon’s announcement. The only identifiable reference to it there is the opening appeal to the Delian Healer (i.e. Apollo):

...I am on the rack, terror
 shakes my soul.
 Delian Healer, summoned by “iē!”
 I await in holy dread what *obligation*, *something* new
 Or *something* back once more with the revolving years,
 You’ll *bring about* for me.
 Oh, tell me, child of golden Hope,
 deathless Response! (Gould, 155-159a, Gould, italics added)

Apart from the internal ambiguity of the key words in the passage, *‘exanúseis’* and *‘chréos’*, which Gould here renders, in a close compromise between the debating opinions, as ‘bring about’ and ‘obligation’ paired with ‘something’⁴⁵, the general tone of the appeal clearly expresses faith in and desperate dependence on the divine

⁴³ ‘I sum it all up by stating that the whole city is the school of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian citizen addresses himself to the most varied types of action as a self-sufficient personality with the utmost versatility and charm’ (qtd. in Knox 73).

⁴⁴ Like Vernant, Knox did not consider the implications of Freud’s peculiar assimilation of ‘destiny’ to ‘Nature’ (discussed above in the Introduction) which, in the larger context of psychoanalytic theory, worked against, rather than in favour of, a straightforward predestination.

⁴⁵ Compared to ‘accomplish’ and ‘thing’ in Lloyd-Jones, and ‘work’ and ‘thing’ in Jebb, who also refers to ‘enact’ and ‘requirement’ in Whitelaw (Jebb n.155, 33).

interference. This tone and references to Apollo as well as Athena and Artemis as the defenders against the disaster certainly do not openly identify the plague itself as divine-sent.⁴⁶ However, the supplication for defence does imply a close relation between the affliction and invoked deities. Knox himself admits that Apollo could not only be depended upon for defence against plagues, but rather to the contrary, he

...is, in fact, traditionally the god who *sends* pestilence; every spectator of the play would in the early scenes think of the opening of the *Iliad*, where Apollo's deadly arrows kill mules, dogs, and men, and "the pyres of the dead burned numerous." The Athenian spectator would also be reminded of the plague at Athens in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, and the current attribution of it to Apollo, on the basis of the god's promise, made oracularly at Delphi at the beginning of the war, that he would collaborate with Spartans (Pericles should have been ousted due to an ancient pollution). (Knox 9, italics added)

Nevertheless, on the grounds that the Chorus here, in contrast to poetic tradition, appeals to Apollo only as the *saviour* and invokes his deadly arrows as *defence* against the plague, identified with the god Ares, '*tòn apòtimon en theoîs theón*' ('the unhonoured god among gods', l.215), Knox concludes – in a second paradoxical step – that the plague is not the effect of Apollo's interference, let alone that of Ares' (whom Knox prefers to consider only a figurative personification of the epidemic). This goes not only against what Knox identifies as the traditional role of Apollo in relation to plagues but also the contextually suggestive fact that Apollo, known as a deity especially presiding over the cases of pollution, has now declared, at least through Creon, his confident knowledge about the cause of the current plague in Thebes which just happens to be an uninvestigated polluting murder of the former king. With the correlative contingent appearance of the Corinthian messenger (who just happens to bring new pieces of news that intensify Oedipus' oracular anxiety), the conjunction of events in this play, starting

⁴⁶ As opposed to the above-discussed imagery of the 'fire-bearing god' swooping upon the city in the priest's appeal to Oedipus.

with Creon's announcement of the Delphic verdict, suggests the already noted much more intimate relationship between Oedipus and Apollo than 'fate', 'freedom', or 'political plot' approaches can grasp.

This is the direction in which Knox is himself moving after positing the plague as non-interference (with the caveat that it is such only so far as Oedipus and everyone else, possibly except Teiresias, can imagine). In his view, one should pay attention in the case of *Oedipus Tyrannus* to the crucial difference between prediction and predetermination:

The external power might predetermine, with or without direct interference; it might also merely predict. This is, it is true, a form of intervention, for the human being to whom the prediction is imparted may be affected in his decisions by the prediction [...] Yet this is an entirely different way of presenting the problem, for it leaves the individual concerned a large measure of free will; the prediction is not fully causal, as the predetermination, with or without incidental interference, is. (Knox 35)

The exact distinction between predetermination 'with or without interference' and prediction 'as a form of intervention' that Knox is trying to draw in this context is difficult to grasp, given the complex interrelation of seemingly contingent 'interference' events as well as neutrally intervening predictions which, in Knox's words, act both as objective imperatives and at the same time give an impression of directing Oedipus' powerful reactions towards a certain goal – namely, the discovery of the prophecy's fulfilment. These crucial events, which include the plague; Apollo's linking it with the murder of Laius; Teiresias' (and thus Apollo's) linking of this murder with Oedipus (and the initial parrincest prophecy); and, finally, the appearance of the Corinthian messenger which crucially alters the original design for the interrogation of the Old Shepherd – all these events occur in such a manner that, if not excludes, then, at least, renders their contingency deeply suspicious.

To illustrate the distinction between predetermination, 'with or without interference', and a 'mere' prediction, Knox contrasts Sophocles' use of Apollo in *Oedipus* with Euripides' use of Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* where the goddess 'predetermines everything' from the start without informing the human characters of her will (34). The fact that Aphrodite conceals her determining influence makes it, for Knox, more decisive – whereas Apollo's will is less so and more neutral because it 'is represented by the prophecy in the play and by the prophecy alone' and because it relies on the 'complement of Oedipus' character' for its fulfilment (38, 41).

At a closer look, this difference is incidental: *both* Aphrodite and Apollo substantially rely on human characters for the fulfilment of their respective daimonic wills, and the fact that a daimon announces his or her will in some form to the human characters does not necessarily imply any diminishment in predetermination. On the contrary, the essential point of Sophocles' perspective on Apollo – and Euripides' on Aphrodite – is to emphasise the infinity of difference between the human and daimonic power where it does not matter whether the human character perceives and/or believes in the daimonic intervention: the daimon works *anyway*. However, to consider this work in *Oedipus* an objective 'mystery' where 'the relation between the predicted destiny and the divine will' is intentionally 'left undefined' would be too hasty (Knox 38).

First of all – and specifically in Sophocles' *Oedipus* – there can be no separation between 'prediction' and 'divine will'. Oedipus is born into the world thoroughly permeated with oracular messages (Apollo, the Sphinx, Teiresias). Furthermore, these messages do not permeate the space and time of the play neutrally but appear to be specifically fashioned to each receiver's character at the given space-time point so that they can affect the receiver's self-identity in the deepest possible degree. This

impression is certainly due to what Knox calls the 'complement' of the human character – and what Laplanche was later to designate as the drive to translate the enigmatic message.

However, it is only one part of the picture, because it is the very presence of the *daimon* in the world of Sophocles' *Oedipus* that creates for the human character what Knox designates as the 'large measure of free will' and is responsible thus for activating the character's relationship to the world. What Knox's conceptualisation carefully misses – and thus prepares the reader to appreciate better – is the fact that this 'measure', far from being 'large', has all the attributes of what Laplanche designates as the situation of primal seduction (discussed above in the Introduction) – and thus lies 'beyond even the most general contingency' (*New Foundations* 89).

If we look into the history of oracular interaction that Sophocles makes available in *Oedipus* (outlined above on pages 30-31), a distinct *daimonic* complement – as opposed to the human one emphasised by Knox – makes itself clearly visible. The contrast that Knox draws between Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* does not only help to appreciate the substantial reliance of the daimonic forces on the human characters for the fulfilment of their will, but also a deeply affective involvement of the *daimon* in the process⁴⁷. In particular, the fact that Sophocles dispenses with any explicit motivation for Apollo to intervene (through his inspired 'servants') into the life of Laius'

⁴⁷ Although Aphrodite's position in relation to *Hippolytus*' plot resembles that of Ghost of Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedy* in that she is outside the immediate action, the goddess is, nevertheless, deeply involved in it, just as the Ghost of Andrea ('But for his sins against me I will this very day take vengeance on Hippolytus; for long ago I cleared the ground of many obstacles, so it needs but trifling toil.').

household⁴⁸ seems to suggest that for him it is, indeed, interference (rather than non-interference) that is the essence of the daimonic.

The original prophecy about Oedipus – the prime mover of the plot – is not mentioned by Jocasta in the context of any solicitation. Therefore, we are led to believe that it came unsolicited (ll.711-12). Nothing substantially changes if solicitation of the prophecy is to be assumed⁴⁹, because what matters for the plot is Apollo's extraordinary status as a god. Presumably, prior to reception of this prophecy, Laius and Jocasta did not care to distinguish between the god and his ministers (as Teiresias later implies⁵⁰). It is the conjunction of the prophecy with god's authority that made them change their mind and thus laid the foundation of the play's conflict. The unconditional nature of Apollo's prophecies in Sophocles, often emphasised in traditional analyses of the play, is in reality only relative; its equation with non-interference and objectivity is fundamentally misleading. For this unconditionality essentially depends on the condition of the god's communicating that exact original prophecy to the mortals in question. If we are to understand that his prophecy was indeed the prime mover of the situation (responding only, as it were, to the fact of Oedipus' birth), then all he needed to do to make the story run a different course was not to communicate the prophecy. If we are to understand that a solicitation by the parents was made, all Apollo needed to do was to communicate the prophecy as a warning against exposure of the child unless the parents desired to rear a parrincest.

⁴⁸ Discussed above in relation to Rudnytsky's argument in *Freud and Oedipus* (Introduction).

⁴⁹ Gould notes here on the fact that in 'Sophocles' time, the world was full of oracles, and it was necessary to have some explanation for the fact that some were to be trusted whereas others were not' (n.712, 91).

⁵⁰ 'Stupid I seem to you, yet to your parents /who gave you natural birth I seemed quite shrewd' (Gould, 435-36).

In the second crucial encounter – when Oedipus himself came to Delphi – Apollo’s task was even simpler. All he needed to do was to tell Oedipus the names and the city. Because he did not do it, the situation at the beginning of the play itself is already irremediable. The response that Creon brings from Delphi and the subsequent scene with Teiresias make it clear that Apollo either did not particularly want to or could not make the situation remediable. The ambiguity of ‘either/or’ here may not matter greatly with regard to the final result, but what it allows us to perceive is the irreducible, intentional, and thus enigmatic element in the communication of the oracles (akin to the above mentioned Aphrodite’s attitude to Hippolytus).⁵¹

In his discussion of religion in the context of psychoanalytic studies – and particularly with reference to the case of Judge Schreber⁵² – Laplanche confronts fundamentally the same problem:

That God is enigmatic, that He compels one to translate, seems obvious in the entire Judaeo-Christian tradition of exegesis. Whether this enigma presupposes that the message is opaque to Himself is plainly a different question. Does God have an unconscious? (‘Seduction, Persecution, Revelation’ 190)

The question of the Christian – or ancient Greek – god’s unconscious seems naturally undecidable precisely because of the human element in the equation. Laplanche never quite answers it in the essay, but he does consistently object to Kant’s conceptualisation of the relationship between the subject and object where the latter ‘conforms’ to the “constitution of our faculty of intuition” and our “*a priori* concepts” (‘Revolution’ 57). Indeed, the place where Sophocles, Knox, and Laplanche meet with regard to this

⁵¹ The comparison with Christ that Knox draws in support of his thesis that divine prescience is not logically incompatible with independence of the individual actions only highlights the peculiarity of Apollo who is much less compassionate and explanatory in his predictions (Knox 40).

⁵² Freud, *Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*

question is not just the irreducibility of the human element in perception but its fundamental failure. Oedipus' final realisation of the utter blindness of his life does not imply, however, that Apollo's influence on it was non-existent. On the contrary, it highlights the infinite depth of its presence which, in the characteristically extreme fashion, becomes for Oedipus the sole reality of life (symbolised in his self-blinding). Accordingly, Laplanche's question of whether the god has an unconscious should be answered in the affirmative with regard to Sophocles' representation of Apollo insofar as anyone who transmits enigmatic messages for Laplanche must needs have an unconscious.

Now that we realise the compromised nature of the relation between the human character and the daimon in Oedipus' case, the problem emerging with the arrival of Creon from Delphi designated at the beginning of this section in terms of the 'multiplicity and singularity of the *daimon*' can be meaningfully reformulated into the *uncertainty* of the *daimon* and, more specifically to the scene in question, the *uncertainty* of the killer(s) of Laius and Oedipus. Although Oedipus is certainly physically alive at this point, he represents a haunting and haunted survival under, as he is to declare after Creon's report, a long-time 'obscure' threat of those 'hands' that did away with the previous king. This appropriation of the threat is going to build up significantly and include not only Laius' position in the *archē* but also, at the level of the unconscious, the very 'murderous hands' (Creon's phrase '*toùs autoéntas cheiri timōreîn tinas* translating the Apollonian oracular injunction is ambiguous exactly to imply both 'punish those whoever did it with their hands' and 'punish with your own hands those whoever did it', 1.107).

However, the multiplicity/singularity motif's mutation into uncertainty comes up in a still quite latent but no less telling image that Oedipus produces in his short response to the priest's supplication immediately preceding the arrival of Creon at the end of the previous scene (with the boundary between those quite uncertain itself). First, Oedipus, in a truly Apollonian fashion, acknowledges that *'gnōtā kouk agnōtá moi/ prosēltheth' himeírontes'* (ll.58-9), rendered by Jebb as 'well known to me are the desires wherewith ye have come' and by Gould as 'oh I know, I know the yearnings that have brought you' which is much closer to the Greek. However, in both renderings the ironic ambiguity of the active and passive in knowing and desire which could literally be expressed by *'known and not unknown to me are the desires that have brought you forth'* (to which Loyd-Jones offers also a very close but somewhat too transparent *'I know, I am not ignorant of the desires with which you have come'*) remains, at least, in part untranslated – especially, in relation to *'Ō paídes oiktroí'* (*'O pitiable children'*) here which unconsciously and most poignantly includes Oedipus himself when, in the next sentence, he deplores: *'eû gàr oid' hótí/noseite pántes, kai nosoúntes, hōs egō/ ouk éstin humōn hóstis ex ísou noseí'* (ll.60-1) – 'I know well that you all are sick, yet, sick as you are, there is not one of you who is as sick as I'. The unconscious literal meaning of the 'sickness' here is closely related to the inclusion and confusion between 'the one and the many', developed in the image of triune 'pain' (*'algos'*) of Oedipus' soul which 'mourns' (*'stenei'*, the same verb used by Oedipus about the 'weighed-down city' at l.5) 'at once for the city, for me, and for you' (l.64). And this all-inclusive both conscious and unconscious 'mourning', caused by the plague of equally dubious nature and attribution, has led Oedipus to Apollo with, as Laplanche says, 'a force of the symptom'

when he is talking in *Seduction, Persecution and Revelation* about the Mosaic compulsive return of monotheism. As he confesses to the suppliants,

*you do not waken me as from a sleep,
for I have wept, bitterly and long, (pollà mén me dakrúsanta)
tired many paths in the wandering of thought (phrontídos plánois)
and the single cure I found by careful search (eu skopōn ēhúriskon íasin
mónēn)*

I have acted on [.]

(ll.65-9, Gould)

We know that this cure is sending Creon to the Delphic ‘Pythian/ halls of Phoebus’ (*Puthika Phoibou dōmath*, ll. 70-1) so that Oedipus, in Ahl’s words trying hard to render the pun on ‘*Puthika*’ (‘Pythian’) and ‘*puthoith*’ (‘to learn’), can ‘delve’ into ‘what [he] must do [drōn] or say [phōnōn] to save this city’ (ll.71-2, Gould). For Ahl, the pun between the Delphic name of Apollo and the verb ‘to learn’ is symptomatic of Oedipus’ obsession with Apollo and oracles that, he claims, in Sophocles’ hands is a sign of critical inadequacy of Oedipus as a thinker and saviour who is ironically exposed by entertaining a seemingly serious conviction that something he can physically ‘do’ or especially ‘say’ will actually be able to stop the plague. Here Ahl cites the skeptical Thucydides who, writing about the plague at the time of composition and staging of *Oedipus*, maintained that the disease had nothing to do with the divine and had a natural cause and was spread by contact.

However, skepticism about both the human and the divine in the context of this play is a most precarious ground, as Oedipus and, this time, *every* remaining figure in his peculiar family constellation is about to find out.

2.5 The Oracular Logic and Return of the Father

Jocasta comes on stage to stop a dangerous quarrel within her family. The Chorus justly welcomes her appearance as ‘timely’ (*kairían*, 631): had she come later, Creon may have paid dearly for advising Oedipus to turn to Teiresias to identify the killer(s) of Laius. After the blind seer points to none other than Oedipus as the polluting culprit of the cryptic prophecy that Creon so proudly brought from Apollo, Oedipus can indeed draw only one logical conclusion: Creon has decided to use this moment of extreme hardship in the city to seize the throne. Creon’s evasive and blatantly implausible plea that he, as the king’s brother-in-law, already enjoys all the privileges he may wish for without the burden of actual responsibility certainly does nothing to help his case in Oedipus’ eyes. If anything, this defence only strengthens Oedipus’ suspicions by reminding him that there is but a very fine line between Creon’s current status and kingship.

Indeed, only a miraculous intervention can help Creon at this moment, and Jocasta certainly provides it by her powerful entrance, instantly breaking up the altercation at its most critical, almost as if Oedipus and Creon were her children:

Wretches, why have you struck up this foolish battle of abuse?
Are you not ashamed to start up private troubles
when the country is thus sick?

(Lloyd-Jones, 634-36)

Joining her voice with the Chorus, she adds the decisive imploring weight to Creon’s desperate but also somewhat shifty oaths of innocence. As Ahl points out in his analysis, which illuminatingly compares Creon’s self-defense with that of Euripides’ Hippolytus

(from the eponymous tragedy composed at approximately the same time as Sophocles *Oedipus*), Jocasta is the one who, as it were, inserts 'gods' (Ahl, 128) into Creon's oaths:

Believe his words, for the *god's* sake, Oedipus
In deference above all to his oath
to the *gods*. Also for me, and for these men!
(Gould, 646-48, italics added)

Creon's oath that precedes this plea of Jocasta does not, in fact, include a direct reference to the gods but to his 'perishing accursed' ('*araĩos...oloimēn*', 644-5):

May my life fail, may I die cursed, if I
did any of the things you said I did!
(Gould, 644-45)

In comparison, Euripides' Hippolytus swears by Zeus to Theseus, his father, that he is innocent of Phaedra's (alleged) rape and suicide and asks to be put to death and not sent into exile if Theseus is not convinced of his innocence:

Hippolytus I am [...] amazed at your blandness,
Father – if you were my son, without one qualm
I would have had you killed, not exiled,
if you had raped my wife. (Bagg, 1615-18)

This is, indeed, a telling contrast with Creon's earlier pleas which, for the most part of the previous scene, invoke neither gods nor an actual preference to death over exile (but precisely the opposite if Oedipus does not relent – while Oedipus does prefer to put Creon to death *rather* than exile him)⁵³.

⁵³ E.g., '...if you find I plotted with that portent / reader, don't have me put to death by your vote / only – I'll vote myself for my conviction./ Don't let unsupported thought convict me!' (Gould, 605-08) – and, especially,

Oedipus But when a swift and secret plotter moves
against me, I must make swift counterplot.
If I lie quiet and await his move,
he'll have achieved his aims and I'll have missed.
Creon You surely cannot mean you want me exiled!
Oedipus Not exiled, no. Your death is what I want!

However, despite Ahl's reference to the qualification of oaths in Athenian courts in Sophocles' time which accepted them only if they were sworn in god's name, Creon's last desperate invocation of a curse on his life (ironic as it is in the context, where he, unlike Hippolytus, does *not* want to die) is, at least, as good as Oedipus' own curse pronounced in the circumstances (of ancient Thebes) against those who may be concealing knowledge about murderer(s) of Laius. More importantly, in the context of this comparison between Sophocles and Euripides, a much more telling contrast opens between Oedipus and Theseus, since the latter, unconvinced of Hippolytus' innocence (just as Oedipus is of Creon's), does *not* put his son to death, but only because he does not want to let him have his way in the punishment:

Theseus A just remark! yet shalt thou not die by the sentence thine own lips pronounce upon thyself; for death, that cometh in a moment, is an easy end for wretchedness. Nay, thou shalt be exiled from thy fatherland, and wandering to a foreign shore drag out a life of misery, for such are the wages of sin. (ll.1619-23)

Whereas Oedipus, who is now not fully convinced of *his* innocence in the matter of Laius' murder either, does relent and lets Creon, his kinsman, go unharmed, substituting his 'hate' (*stúgos*) for punishment. Unlike Euripides' Theseus, Oedipus does yield to the Chorus' plea, moved both by the appeal to the lack of direct evidence for his conviction and invocation of the troubled 'dying land':

Oedipus Do you know what you are asking?

Chorus Yes.

Oedipus Tell me, then.

Chorus Never to cast into dishonored guilt, with an unproved assumption, a kinsman who has bound himself by curse.

Oedipus Now you must understand, when you ask this, you ask my death or banishment from the land.

Chorus No, by the god who is the foremost of all gods,
the Sun! No! Godless,
friendless, whatever death is worst of all,
let that be my destruction, if this
thought ever moved me!
but my ill-fated soul
 this dying land
wears out – the more if to these older troubles
she adds new troubles from the two of you!

Oedipus Then let him go, though it must mean my death,
or else disgrace and exile from the land.
my pity is moved by your words, not by his –
he'll only have my hate, wherever he goes.

(654-72, Gould)

This exchange does prove that Oedipus is not the kind of tyrant Creon implied he was.

However, the proof is not unambiguous. Why does Oedipus let Creon go against what

he evidently thinks his better (and anxious) judgment? Creon's reaction to this is

remarkable: just as earlier he does not show any surprise at the fact that Teiresias

called Oedipus the killer of Laius ('if he said so, you are the one who knows (*oistha*)',

574, Gould), so now he seems to be explaining the 'unreasonableness' ('*agnōtos*',

677, Gould) of Oedipus' behaviour, the 'sullenness' of his 'yielding' ('*stugnòs mèn*

eikōn', 673), in terms of the latter's 'excessively wrathful/passionate nature' ('*barūs,*

d', hótan/ thumou perásês', 673-4). Jebb's appreciation of the coordination between

'sullenness' and 'wrathfulness' ('*thumou*') here makes his translation articulate the

sense with particular accuracy:

Sullen in yielding art thou seen, *even as* vehement in
the excesses of thy wrath; but such *natures* are justly sorest
for themselves to bear. (Jebb, 673-5; and the note, pp.94-5)

Consciously, Creon does not seem to appreciate the deeper contradiction in the excessive wrath and sullen yielding of Oedipus' 'nature': apparently, *again*, so long as the latter wins. He does seem to explain the lack of reason in this 'natural' behaviour as, indeed, natural in itself: first, Oedipus' reason is clouded because he gives in to wrath too much, then this same wrath heavily clouds his relenting and his reasoning in general, from beginning to end. This is what seems to be the one conscious observation that Creon makes on Oedipus' nature in his last verse in this scene – which Jebb's version closely renders as

I have found thee undiscerning,
but in the sight of these I am just. (676-7)

However, Creon's word *agnōtos*, which Jebb here renders as 'undiscerning' (cf. Gould's 'unreasonable' and Lloyd-Jones' 'uncomprehending'), sums up Oedipus in a number of suggestive synchronic senses in the context of this and other momentous scenes throughout the play⁵⁴. Gould in his note on this verse traces back the derivation of the word to *gnōme* in the periphrasis 'I discovered that you don't have true *gnōme*', a true insight (n.677, 89). Although syntactically and consciously Creon seems to mean that Oedipus' nature is to blame for this lack, the grammatical and semantic connotations of *agnōtos* (*agnōs*), used both in the active ('unknowing') and passive ('unknown') sense as well as in the modal meaning of 'not to be known' (Liddell and Scott), tie in much better with Oedipus' particular sense of lack that permeates his nature, from without as well as from within: the uncertainty about his origins as well as certain past *events* in relation to the current situation.

⁵⁴ Most notably, '*gnōtā kouk agnōtā*', 'known and not unknown [are to me the desires with which you come]', says Oedipus to the suppliants at the very beginning (58-59).

Although the lack of this *particular* insight is not mentioned either by Oedipus or Creon during their altercation, Oedipus' exacerbation throughout the scene and his sense of doom towards its end are certainly based on the disturbing link between his sense of uncertainty about his parents and the crimes against them which are predicted to him (without confirming/disclosing their identity), first of all, by Apollo. The prediction, as we are about to learn from Oedipus himself, results in his particular moral and actual inability to know his parents (without the risk of breaking the taboos) and thus an inability to know himself fully in relation to others, probed open sharply by Teiresias. The oracular logic of the latter in conjunction with that of Oedipus' own solemn curse on those who conceal the murder(ers) of Laius reminds Oedipus now, much to his dismay, that his (grudging) acknowledgement of the lack of direct evidence against Creon makes the specific lack of conclusive evidence in his *own* favour, as *non*-killer of Laius and *real* son of Polybus, grow into its (potentially terrifying) significance. He has blamed Creon, with excessive anger, not on the basis of direct evidence of the latter's conniving with the seer, but, emphatically, to defend his *own* innocence and truth of his *gnōmē* ('*ekmánthan'· ou gàr dê phoneùs halōsomai*' – 'Ask on: I shall not be proved a murderer', 576), called into question by Teiresias. Thus the ambiguity of the sense of doom growing out of Oedipus' frustrated exasperation, evident but not elaborated in his last exchanges with Creon in this scene, seems to point, in consonance with confrontations in the previous scenes, not only to a deep-rooted impossibility of *gnōme* (insight) at the heart of Oedipus' 'excessive' nature but also to a deep *inevitability* of this insight for him (which will resound, as we are about to see, in the specific word for 'heart' at the very end of this scene). He certainly 'hates' to let Creon go under pressure from the Thebans and Jocasta – Creon is the only one who can conceivably stand

directly between him and accusations of Teiresias. He ‘hates’ to let him go because this effectively merges the search for the killer(s) of Laius with Oedipus’ (older) search for his own innocence in relation to his parents and Apollo. But he also *has* to let Creon go because, as we are about to find out, the convergence of these two searches on the question of Oedipus’ innocence cannot only be the work of *Creon*’s, however plausible – or rather, as they both paradoxically admit, implausible – motives for coup d’état together with Teiresias. The, apparently, freakish fit of political wrangling between Oedipus and Creon – ‘foolish strife of tongues’ (*áboulon [...] stásin glóssēs*), ‘private troubles’ (*ídia kaká*), ‘petty grief’ (*mēden álgos*), as Jocasta calls it at her entrance – does conceal, at least, one actual but yet unknown killer. Of whose identity Creon cannot (and, as we saw in the previous section, does not really want to) have a (conscious) clue. Nevertheless, Creon does represent, in his consistent silence and keeping silent over what he does not ‘know’ or ‘understand’⁵⁵, the Delphic oracle, the one that ‘according to Heraclitus, [...] does not speak, does not dissimulate’ but ‘signifies’ (Ricoeur, 18). And it is through his negative acceptance of Creon’s voice, to which he denies all truth and to which he is made to listen in the end by the Chorus and Jocasta, that Oedipus, however grudgingly, starts looking into himself and gradually agreeing with Teiresias (a more explicit and vehement Apollonian voice), when the latter says ‘Creon is not your pain; you are’ (*Kréōn dé soi pēm’ oudén, all’ autòs su soi*, 379).

This reminds us (in response to Goux’s argument about Oedipus’ tyrannical nature) that Oedipus is *not* a tyrant and that he is also *not* a conscious (free-thinking) cold-blooded killer. He, certainly, is or rather was a very *hot*-blooded but also a

⁵⁵ (*ouk oid’ eh’ hois gàr mē phronō sigân philō.* – ‘I do not know and when I do not understand I prefer to keep silent’ (574).

singularly accidental killer, and also a self-defending one. The extraordinary fantasmatic dimension of Oedipus' speeches that brim with the reenactment of his unwitting crimes, in combination with his behaviour towards Creon, reveals itself substantially at a meta- or trans-personal level, the level of the *daimon*'s voice and message. He proves from the very beginning that his innocence for him, especially in the murder of Laius (but also in the matter of 'knowing' his parents), is not a personal but rather a public, *ethical* matter, specifically in the sense in which Heidegger applies *ethos* as 'accomplished dwelling' to Sophocles' tragedy, where 'human beings become manifest in their relation to being, which is to say, in the manner in which they dwell in the midst of beings as a whole' (McNeill in *Philosophy and Tragedy*, 171). It is a matter of public well-being, revealed both in the synecdochical and metaphorical relation between the part and whole, and thus a *daimonic* matter, which he vowed to restore, respectively, both to the people and Apollo (*the daimon*), from the very start. As much as one in his position might prefer to displace or let this matter 'remain where it has stopped' ('*énth' élēksen, autoû ménein*', 686), as the Chorus suggest he do, he feels obliged to pursue it, because there is no difference between the personal and public in this *daimonic* domain. Oedipus' distinctive feature thus, already prominent in the previous scenes, is not only a remarkable fidelity to the city (to which Creon may, in part, owe his life) but also a no less remarkable, meta-personal fidelity to the oracular/*daimonic* message.

Despite the appearance (and lengthy critical arguments) to the contrary, Oedipus' and then Jocasta's relation to the oracular voice will prove to be of paramount importance. Both may argue against or rather try hard to disprove the truth of the oracular messages, but they never effectively disengage themselves from the impact of the message itself. Its murkiness or even utter meaninglessness does not really dissolve

the link between them and the oracle altogether. On the contrary, both Oedipus and Jocasta *need* the oracles to be meaningless in a very particular way, so that their own lives and the truth of *their* insight may have the meaningfulness they have (and unwittingly lack). Just as the innocence of Creon in the context of Teiresias' accusations against Oedipus makes his eyes open at a certain possible culpability on his part, so a coagulation of a certain reality in the meaning of oracular messages threatens to upset the order in Oedipus' and Jocasta's lives. This is true in both cases because, however obscure may the particular message be, they all *do* have a link to reality, not only as facts but also as wished-for facts.

In Oedipus' case, as we will see, Apollo's prophecy to Oedipus ambiguously relates to a 'wondrous' (*'thaumasai mèn axía'*, 777), impossible rumour that suddenly 'attacked' (*'epéstē'*, 777) Oedipus' certainty about his identity as a son. In Jocasta's, it is a certain disturbing impossibility about Laius' murder in relation to his predicted fate as a father. Teiresias is the first one who, within the play, attempts resolving these impossibilities by relating them to each other, but his attempt has to be necessarily riddling, and is unsuccessful with the addressee since for the latter the seer, too, suffers from a lack of full factual insight; or perhaps, Teiresias simply does not need to go into the details of the Laius' death at the cross-roads, since, as he says, Oedipus' downfall is Apollo's job, not his. However this may be judged by the end of the tragedy, Jocasta is certainly another character who should take a significant, if, admittedly, unintended credit for bringing the two impossibilities in a much closer, *spatially* revealing relation. And Oedipus should, certainly, take another part of the credit for not turning away from the dark hint at this relation that has just dawned upon him.

At the moment of her entrance, Jocasta does not yet understand all this complexity of the situation between Oedipus, Creon, Teiresias, the oracles, and their unsuspected links to real events. But, after a safe dismissal of Creon, she does demand explanation (from Oedipus, *not* Creon, which is the first, barely perceptible tip towards the particular route of her argument leading to the major reversal). Oedipus is eager to oblige as he sees in her the only compassionate arbiter and adviser left. The Chorus, echoing Creon, want her to make the matter ‘remain where it has stopped’ (*‘énth’ élēksen, autoû ménein’*, 686), which is why they find nothing better to say than that Oedipus and Creon were *both* to blame, of ‘blind suspicion’ (*‘dókēsis agnōs’*) and the ‘injustice wounds’ (*‘dáppei...tò mē’ndikon’*, 681), respectively (indeed, again as if they were children). Such a division and thus concealment of blame by the Chorus is taken by Oedipus as a *fresh* insult against his (and the city’s) cause and innocence. He turns on the Chorus with resentment asking if they really understand the meaning of this *division* of guilt and request to hush the matter up:

See what you’ve come to in your honest thought,
In seeking to relax and blunt my heart? (687-8, Gould)

Did you really mean by your requests throughout the scene, Oedipus seems to ask, that I, as your king, am not able to face the accusers and apparent plotters with clear mind and clean conscience? That the city should, perhaps, better perish of plague because of my inaction? Or (as we have just seen) that I, rather than Creon, am to abide by my own curse and go into exile or die? While none of this is mentioned directly in the question, there is also another significant overtone at the very end of Oedipus’ verse in the word *kéar*, which adds a sinister, reversing counterpoint to the seemingly obvious suggestion.

Gould renders this word as 'heart' (while Jebb opts for 'zeal' and Lloyd-Jones for 'passion'). Its metaphorical relation to *kéarnon*, 'the carpenter's axe', is emphasized by the verb 'blunt' (*katamblúnōn*). But, as Liddell and Scott note, in Homer this word is contracted to *kêr*, which makes it sound even closer (although *kéar* is already close enough) to *Kér*, 'the goddess of death or doom', or 'doom, death, esp. violent [...]', or 'plague, disease'. This overtone harks back to the Chorus' invocation of Zeus' son (Apollo) as the hunter for the hidden/hiding killer of Laius, right after Teiresias' departure, who is bringing with him the '*deinai Kêres anaplákētoi*', 'the dreaded goddesses/ of Death, who never miss' (472-3, Gould). In Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, *Kér* is also the word for the Sphinx ('*harpaxáandra Kér*', 'man-snatching bane'). Thus in the sense of doom and foreboding that started to emerge with the Chorus' invocation after the departure of Teiresias and to coalesce inside and around Oedipus, especially with his letting Creon go, the poetic connotations that seem to spring for a moment out of this specific word for 'heart' figure Oedipus' desire as his 'doom' and identify it with the voice of the oracular (*daimonic*) message, both in its sinister and enigmatic quality and also in its uncannily close relation to the situation at *hand*.⁵⁶

However subtle this poetic imagery may be for the Chorus, they do, in a sense, provide for Oedipus' doom by making him turn to Jocasta, after they try to present the guilt as divided between the two men. But they certainly see Oedipus' frustration with it and try to make up by responding to his anxious question with an oath that, for them, their king is still 'the lucky helmsman' ('*eúpompos génoio*', 696), who 'in the time of

⁵⁶ As Gould informs us in the note on the Chorus' use of *Kér* at 473, 'The original scribe of the great manuscript in Florence wrote, not "goddesses of death", *kêres*, but "hands," *cheires* [so that the Chorus' line read]: "and along with the son of Zeus there came the terrible *hands* that never fail of their victim". (Gould 70, the last italics added).

troubles set the restless city on a true course' (*'hós...en pónoisin alíousan kat' orthòn ourisas'*, 694-5). But at this particular moment, *after* Creon is let go under their pressure, this praise is an exact mirror image of his painfully incomplete denunciation of Teiresias and Creon, condemning the truth of their statements⁵⁷ but not being able either to fully counter them or bring the apparent plotters to answer. He would have appreciated it much more if the citizens proclaimed him the same 'lucky helmsman' not *in spite of* what has been said against him by the 'slanderers' but *because* they would have fully upheld him and flatly denounced the latter (better still if he could have done it fully by himself – that is, if he knew for sure the accusations against him are *completely* absurd). However, Oedipus can only express his disappointment at finding the Chorus short of this kind of boldness and fidelity of judgment (his characteristic *gnōmē*), which he hopes to find in his wife and thus reaffirm his confidence and kingship.

Yet, as we have seen already, this reaffirmation for Oedipus, because of the deeper root of his lack of self-confidence, is not a straightforward power measure, in which he would devise with his queen some method to neutralise and/or execute those who are a nuisance or a threat. Even before Jocasta transfixes Oedipus' mind by mentioning the 'place where three roads meet' (less than a hundred lines later), Oedipus has already demonstrated that he does not want his kingship at any cost, specifically that of the Chorus' and Jocasta's pity for Creon. We saw that his own apparent lack of pity for Creon conceals a certain, much stronger lack of pity for himself, sown, to the best of Oedipus' memory in Corinth and sealed, as we are about to find out, in Delphi and even

⁵⁷ E.g., Teiresias – '...from this day / say no word to either these or me, / for you are the vile polluter of this land...You live, unknowing, with those nearest to you / in the greatest shame...A mother's and father's double lashing / terrible-footed curse will soon drive you out' (Gould 351-53, 366-67, 417-18) – and Creon, in response to Oedipus' 'Authority must be maintained.' – 'Not if the ruler's evil.' (Gould 628-29).

more on the road *from* Delphi to Thebes. To this oracularly inspired lack of self-pity and what can be construed, at least, in part as pity towards his (supposed) parents and the people of Thebes Oedipus largely owes his present reputation as the conqueror of the Sphinx, the king of Thebes, the husband and father of a (still) happy family. This success is a product of painstaking struggle with the oracle, of (literally) keeping the distance between him and the parrincestuous criminal in the prophecy – but which, paradoxically, seals his image for him as such a parrincest through a negative association. This paradox shares its nature with the one described by the psychoanalytic German term for ‘negation’ (*Verneinung*), where ‘keeping the distance’ from the unwanted implies both ‘never approaching to’ *and* ‘never losing sight of’, reflected in Oedipus’ case by the ‘stars’ by which he measured and still measures his distance from Corinth and which, in the sense of their reference to the *daimon*, gave him the point of the absolute negative self-reference. The need to keep this delicate paradoxical balance of negative self-identification, the need to exercise the lack of self-pity (in order to be able to accept one’s self at all), the sense of battling *and* following his *daimon*, is more important for Oedipus than control over others. And it is, again, not only because of, as Creon has already suggested (and Jocasta will do very soon), a certain passionate imbalance in his nature, a peculiar proclivity towards wrath and fear which makes Oedipus’ ‘heart’ (*kéar*) and mind (*gnōme*) seize upon a threatening, disturbingly impossible idea and react to it with a vehement repression (that is, appropriating it under the stress of negation), as if it were a hard-proven, real fact. Oedipus will, indeed, himself acknowledge very shortly this peculiarity of his nature when he tells us and

Jocasta in what is considered by Ahl as a strangely displaced prologue⁵⁸ (17-18) that he left his (other) family in Corinth many years ago because, initially, he could not live with the taunt of a drunk man who called him 'not his father's son' ('*plastòs hōs eiēn patri*', 780). Now, we know, he cannot live with himself because of, apparently, no less absurd allegation of Teiresias that he killed Laius and, *again*, that he does not know his parents! – which endows the former with its own negative reality, despite the odds. And although no one yet believes in the truth of either of the accusations (Oedipus has not told his story yet), it is already clear that a troubled relation towards (the murder of) the king-father has been a common repressed problem both for Oedipus and the Thebans. But if before the scene with Teiresias and Creon there was a clear distinction (particularly, in Oedipus' mind) between his earlier, negative relation to the *almost* fantasmatic murder of the father and the 'ancient', *almost* forgotten, but actual murder of the previous Theban king, now, because Teiresias' allegations could not have been effectively refuted on the basis of Creon's political involvement in them, there will be no obstacle to the deepening of the commonality between these two cases. On the contrary, their conjunction provides a deeper, disturbingly real object to substantiate the oracular/fantasmatic dimension in both, which, when the cases were not associated, was checked by its apparent lack of connection to the 'objective' circumstances. But to make

⁵⁸ Ahl's inquisitiveness about the status of Oedipus' phrase 'My father was Polybus of Corinth' ('*emoi patēr mēn Polúbos ēn Korinthios*', 1.774) is derived, partly, from Aristotle's confusing reference to this same phrase as an example of a typical tragic prologue (*Rhetoric* 2.1415A) that is normally supposed to be found at the beginning of the play (which it is certainly not in this case, at least, in the available manuscripts). The other and more substantial question about this phrase raised by Ahl is, nevertheless, why the father *was* and not *is*. Oedipus, indeed, cannot know about Polybus' death at the moment of utterance. Gould's note on the same phrase helps to resolve the difficulty of this introduction being placed halfway into the play: in it, he points out that 'Polybus was known as an ancient king in several legends, though not usually of Corinth' which would warrant a seemingly awkward middle prologue (Gould, n.775, 98). However, the question of 'was' versus 'is' here certainly remains to be dealt with.

this object emerge in sufficient, fantasmatic *and* real, detail from Oedipus' dark forebodings we certainly need Jocasta and her reasons for dismissing the scandal around Oedipus' relation to the murder of Laius as well as the meaning of this murder as such.

To change Oedipus' *luck* (*tyche*, a very important notion in the context) with the previous interlocutors, who tended to pose a continuous challenge to Oedipus on this subject, Jocasta comes wanting to reassure and understand; her apparent purpose, unlike that of Teiresias and in a different sense that of Creon, is to allay Oedipus' anger and anxiety altogether (that is, not to channel it against Oedipus himself). Also, unlike the Chorus, Jocasta does not want, at least initially, to hush the whole matter up by simply taking Oedipus inside and making him subdue his anger; rather, she seems eager to make an informed judgment (perhaps, even a denunciation) of the matter, provided Oedipus tells her (again, for the god's sake) exactly what happened:

Please, for the god's sake, Lord, explain to me [also]
the reason why you have conceived this wrath? (698-9, Gould)

Having found the Chorus a disappointing ally, Oedipus prefaces his account of the events in a (ironically) Creonian fashion: he says that he 'honours' ('*sébō*', which, primarily, means 'revere'/'worship' gods) Jocasta more than '*these*', i.e. the Chorus ('*tōnde*', 700, which echoes Creon's exact word at l.91), and that he will tell *her* everything. His 'everything' is that Creon has conspired against him ('*moi bebouleukōs*', 701) with the help of the 'wicked prophet' ('*mántin[...]*kakoúr*gon', 705), literally, to 'say that I became the murderer of Laius' ('*phonéa me phēsì Laiou kathestánai*', 703). Here Oedipus' desperate conviction of his innocence is at one of its peaks: even the verb he uses to refer to his relation to Laius' murder in view of the conspirators is not 'be' but*

rather 'become', 'come into a certain state' ('*kathestánai*' – the same verb Oedipus uses about the suppliants, who have come to sit on the steps of his palace in a certain state/mood). That is, in his view, they want to *make* him the murderer or that they devised *something* to make him such. And he needs someone – now, only Jocasta – to share his contrary conviction and *unmake* theirs.

The eager queen, however, in whom Oedipus hopes to find a fellow thinker, turns out to be – as Hamlet would say – 'too much in the son', that is, *too* much like Oedipus both in the manner but also in the object of her thinking, the son. This, at first, seems to align her (in a peculiarly unwitting way) more with Teiresias, Creon, and the Chorus rather than with her king. Instead of pursuing Oedipus' line of thought and, at least, considering, if not condemning, the conspiratorial link between Teiresias and Creon *behind* the surprising oracular accusations, Jocasta, on hearing that Creon used the seer's 'mouth' ('*stoma*') for uttering the accusation to keep his (mouth) 'completely innocent' ('*pân eleutheroî*', 704-5), exclaims 'you, then, [*Oedipus*] should *absolve* yourself ('*sú nun apheîs seautòn*') of 'what you are talking about' ('*hōn légeis péri*', 707). Both Jebb and Gould note that Jocasta's 'absolve' ('*apheîs*') here has a most appropriate (all the more so as it is unconscious) legal reference to the specific situation 'when the natural avenger of a slain man voluntarily released the slayer from the penalties' (Jebb, n.707, 98). Thus, instead of joining the prosecution on Oedipus' side, Jocasta sounds more like her true/unwitting position, that of Laius' plaintiff and Oedipus' advocate.

Furthermore, Jocasta's reason why Oedipus should absolve himself – while he has not even begun to accuse himself of anything except inaction towards what looks like a blatant treason – is not her conviction that he is innocent while his accusers are

not, but that they, as mortals (*'bróteion'*), in the person of Teiresias, simply lack evidence to support their oracular accusations: 'no mortal', she claims, 'possesses the art of divination' (*'bróteion oudèn mantikēs échon téchnēs.'*, 709). Here, apart from approaching the issue with a 180 degree-difference from Oedipus, Jocasta unwittingly exposes the peculiar falsity and also a peculiarly *oracular* bend of her own reasoning: if no human can possess the art of divination and thus know truly the meaning of the past, present, and future, then there should be no way of telling who is right and who is wrong in the oracular matters – which point she surely makes, only forgetting to include herself among the mortals – although later she will not forget to include even Apollo in that group. In his observation of Jocasta's phenomenon, Ahl concludes that 'she herself [thus] usurps the oracle's mysticism' (133). But, given the extraordinary control of the oracular truth and logic over her thinking in these scenes as well as the deep and *active* involvement of the oracular word (*'manteía'*, both as voice and meaning) in the events of this tragedy, it is no less appropriate to say that it is the oracle's mysticism that usurps Jocasta – as well as Laius, and then Oedipus – at a certain point in their lives, but it does so precisely as a negated truth of transgressive, alienated desire, thus turning the characters involved into interpretative *subjects*. Jocasta's insistence on the absence of certainty with regard to the oracular truth in general rather than on the incredibility of Oedipus' particular case at hand should alert Oedipus to the peculiarity of her approach in comparison to his own negative association with the oracle – which, on the contrary, acknowledges the general truth of Apollo, contesting it only on a particular point. In other words, from the beginning Jocasta's and Oedipus' attitude towards the truth, although similar in method and the end result, are opposed in the aims.

However, Oedipus, of course, has neither the time nor the mood for a detached analytical observation because Jocasta goes straight for her reason for the suspension of certainty in the oracular matters. Unexpectedly for her, this reason has a diametrically opposite effect on Oedipus: it rivets him almost with a *full certainty* about Teiresias' pronouncement and upsets his whole sense of innocence and distance from the *daimon* even further. Jocasta reveals to him that her belief in the impossibility of human divination turns out to be based on the fact that Laius was killed, 'according to the rumour' ('*hōsper g' hē phátis*'), 'at a place where three roads meet' ('*en triplais hamaksitoís*') by 'some foreign robbers' ('*ksénoi potè lêstai phoneúous*', 715-6). According to the original oracle brought to Laius by Apollo's servants, the killer should have been Laius' own child ('*phonéa genésthai patrós*', 721), who, because of the oracle, was 'exposed with yoked feet on a trackless mountain' ('*árthra keínos enzeúksas podôin érripsen [...] eis ábatos hóros.*', 719), 'not three days after his birth' ('*paidòs de blástas ou diéschon hēmérai*', 717).

One of the first murky points in Jocasta's argument here is her distinction between 'Phoebus himself' and his 'servants/ministers' ('*Phoibou autoú*' versus '*tōn hupēretōn*', 712). She says that, in 'her opinion' ('*erō*'), the prophecy that came to Laius was definitely not from Apollo himself but from his inadequate human servants because it, apparently, was never fulfilled: 'Apollo in this case', she concludes, 'never brought about' ('*kantaúth' Apóllōn out' [...] énusen*', 720) what his ministers predicted in his name – and that 'the things the god must track/ he will painlessly reveal himself' (Gould, '*hōn gàr àn theòs/ chreían ereunâ hradíōs autos phaneî*', 724-5). But, at the same time, she says that she bases her assurance on the 'rumour' ('*phátis*', 715), that is, again, on human mediation – which in this case is not even that of the prophets but that of Laius'

attendant who, though having witnessed the murder at the cross-roads, could say nothing about the whole incident, except for the famous 'one thing', which we already heard from Creon and to which Jocasta firmly clings (as we will see, in a very symptomatic way). It is obvious that Jocasta's dismissal of the oracular truth in principle on the basis of a particular oracular version of Laius' murder is an inverted synecdoche: it is not really the part that is used to disavow the whole but rather the whole that is used to disavow the peculiar part. On the one hand, Jocasta negates the oracular truth in principle since, indeed, both Laius and his child seem to have perished at different places, different times, and contrary to the oracle. On the other, she also has to make use of the negated oracular truth to *deny* (disavow) the fact and meaning of Laius' murder itself – the murder which seems to affect the certainty of her general negation and put the two, supposedly disconnected deaths, that of the son and of the father, in an enigmatically converging relation. Thus Jocasta's general suspension of the oracular truth, while being based upon her affirmation of the non-existence of her son and thus Laius as a father, paradoxically works for the peculiar return of both *father* and *son* in the negative: oracles are not true because Laius was not killed by his son because he did not really have one – and even if he did, the son cannot have done it, to the best of *my* knowledge. It is a mirror image of Oedipus' reaction to the conjunction of the drunk man's rumour and Apollo's prophecy: the oracle cannot be true because I cannot transgress against my father and mother, that is to the best of *my* knowledge. These negating responses to the oracles in both cases actually give life to oracles and the transgressive desire in them – precisely because what they negate is the *human* knowledge and not the oracular message as such, which, indeed, persists through this negation. It is extremely remarkable to see, in this context, that Jocasta starts her

demonstration of the falsity of the oracles with '[Oedipus], *absolve yourself*', instead of, for example, 'Creon could not have done that!' – the extraordinary suggestion behind the focus in Jocasta's opening points to the unexpected fact that, not only does Oedipus have reasons to believe that he may be involved with Laius' murder closer than anyone would think, but so does Jocasta, in her own way.

Another moment of interest (if not alarm) here is that Jocasta does not identify Apollo's 'servants' who brought them the original oracle, which led to her son's exposure. Both Jebb and Gould understand her word for 'attendants' as referring to the 'Delphic priests' or 'divinely possessed' (Jebb, n.708, 98; Gould, n.712, 91). But Teiresias did earlier mention, as a point in his favour, that, although Oedipus does not have respect for the truth of his insight, Oedipus' 'real parents' *did* ('*goneûsi d', hoî s' éphusan, émphrones*', 436). Oedipus, certainly, never gets to ask *what* the seer exactly means by this, because he wants (and fails) to learn first *who* the seer means when he mentions Oedipus' parents. It is beyond doubt that Teiresias means Jocasta and Laius, and he may as well be that 'servant of Apollo' who is aware of the exposure of the baby as the measure of the parents' appreciation of the truth behind the Apollonian insight he may have delivered.

However, Oedipus, again, seems too distracted or rather too riveted to relate all the details of his previous dialogue with the seer to the larger meaning of Jocasta's story and reasoning. He fails to notice the fact that Jocasta turned him effectively into a defendant and has completely circumvented the matter of Creon's possible role in the events. Moreover, he does not seem to react even to the extremely suggestive 'yoking' of the child's feet in Jocasta's story (let alone the terrible story itself). Gould's interpretation of this remarkable fact, in the immediacy of its dramatic moment, gives

the meaning of Jocasta's verb '*enzeúxas*' (*enzeúgnumi*), 'yoked', as a plausible explanation, since 'it says nothing about the mutilation' and thus 'allows Oedipus to continue his preoccupation with "the place where three roads meet"' (n.718, 93). In comparison, Jebb reads the verb as 'fastened together by *driving a pin through* them, so as to *maim* the child and thus lessen the chance of its being reared if it survived exposure', thus rendering Oedipus' reaction to it even less explicable (n.718, 100, italics added). Given the extraordinary suggestiveness of Sophocles' poetic language in this tragedy, especially in the development of the key imagery, both commentators, in a sense, completely miss (or do not develop enough) an important point: Jocasta's verb *enzeúxas* is derived from *zeúgma*, which is, indeed, the Greek word for 'yoke' but *also* for that peculiar figure of speech, zeugma, 'wherein *two* subjects are used *jointly* with the *same* predicate, which strictly belongs only to *one*' (Liddell and Scott, italics added). Zeugma is literally a 'place where three roads', and also how the exposed baby's feet, peculiarly 'meet': a joining of the two in one, which, although formally possible, is not *strictly* regular (or permissible) – a vital link to the imagery of relations between Oedipus, Laius, and Jocasta's desire in the context of the oracles. From this point of view, Oedipus' extraordinarily sensitive fixation on the image of the triple-road without, apparently, taking into account the 'yoked' feet themselves may not look like a contradiction (especially, if we remember that the most troubling aspect of the 'shameful' marks for Oedipus is not only their physicality but their *meaning*, their relation to the mystery of his parents).

The expression itself (*'triplaís hamaksitoís'*, 'triple wagon-way')⁵⁹ in Jocasta's narrative causes him to lapse into a sort of momentary loss of consciousness:

*hoión m'akoúsant' artiōs échei, gúnai,
psuchēs plánēma kanakínēsis phrenōn*

What a wandering of the spirit and a stirring of the mind is upon me,
Lady, since I heard your words just now!

(726-7, Lloyd-Jones)

The compelling force of the expression, rendered closely by Lloyd-Jones, shows not only Oedipus' spirit lapsing, for a moment, into a restless 'wandering' (*'plánēma'*, which also means 'unsettled-ness', 'going astray') but also his mind violently roused (*'kanakínēsis phrenōn'*) as if by a nightmare. In his interpretation of Oedipus' explanation of his reaction

I thought you said that Laius was attacked
and butchered at a place where three roads meet. (729-30, Gould)

Jebb points out *'édox'* (rendered here by Gould as 'I thought' but which is closer to Jebb's archaic 'Methought' because of the implied dislocation in the 'I' into an intermediary position between active and passive) as 'the word of one who has been in a troubled dream' (Jebb, n.727, 101). In the same note Jebb links *plánēma* with this sensation as referring to 'the fearful "wandering" of his thought back to *other* days and scenes' (italics added), which no one else is yet aware of. It is compelling to read and imagine Oedipus' reaction at this point in terms of his primary oracular nightmare, suddenly hitting the core of his many years' negation of the oracle. It is especially now that Oedipus' earlier words, addressed to the suppliants, in which he assures them that

⁵⁹ At the unconscious and, one may say, even esoteric level, his extraordinarily sensitive reaction to the expression seems also extremely pertinent to the place and season of his exposure as a baby, since it is related to the progress of Arcturus, the brightest star in the constellation Boötes (sharing its name with the Theban land), that lies near Ursa Major, which is also called the Wagon (*hamaksa*), and means literally the 'guardian of the bear' (*arktos, ourus*).

they 'do not wake [him] from untroubled sleep' ('ouch' *húpnô g' heúdontá m' eksegeírete*', 65) because he 'had followed many ways of *wandering* thought' ('*phrontídos plánois*', 68) about how to save Thebes seem to acquire a supra-literal sense: the roads that Oedipus had followed to avoid Apollo's prophecy are now revealing their terribly misleading route, which, after all, was not that untroubled for Oedipus, as he is about to reveal.

But, still, the dream that flashed through Oedipus' mind just now is not his worst one yet: at the moment he fears that he may just have been Laius' unwitting killer, not his son. Soon, however, he will testify to the fact that the terms in this opposition are not only compatible for him, but that they have an ineluctable metaphorical relation. The irony now is that Oedipus acts and desires as if he *were* Laius' son. Between his first scene with Creon and encounter with Teiresias he makes a remarkable proclamation of himself as the avenger of Laius, to parts of which we should turn to re-involve Jocasta in a wider context of Oedipus' anxiety at the moment.

Formally, murder in 5th century Athens could be prosecuted only by the next of kin. In this case (of ancient Thebes recreated for and by Athenians), because the family as well as the 'loyal' subjects of the victim have proved impeded and not so keen on revenge, it is Oedipus who takes up the task as a 'stranger', both 'to the report' and 'to the deed' ('*ksénos mèn tou̐ lógou [...]/ ksénos dè tou̐ prachthéntos*', 219-20).

Despite this formal inconvenience, he, certainly, does have links to the family and, apparently, a certain clue in order to reopen the process of justice. In his somewhat baffling sentence 'I would be unable to follow the track far by myself, without having a clue' ('*ou gàr àn makràn/íchneuon autós, mè ouk échōn ti súmbolon*', 220-1), he seems

to imply that he *does* have one, while he is not supposed to have any, precisely because of his ‘late’ (*hústeros*) arrival at Thebes.

This time-lag will be extremely interesting to relate to Jocasta’s version of the events. The commentators, however, try to elucidate it in its immediate context. Jebb in his note on the passage cites Professor Goodwin, together with whom he reasonably points out ‘by myself’ as the real, albeit very succinct, protasis in the sentence (*autós*, which he renders as ‘alone’ – Jebb, n.220, 41). For Jebb and Goodwin, this ‘by myself’ is an unreal condition, since Oedipus is not actually alone in tracing the murderer(s). This is exactly his ‘clue’ (*súmbolon*): it is in his ‘link’ (which word Lloyd-Jones uses as translation of *súmbolon*) with the Thebans and the family of the victim, who, he hopes, may know or help him find the culprit.

Gould, on the other hand, aligns himself with those who treat the passage as ‘strictly illogical’ (n.221, 42), because they seem to understand ‘without having a clue’ not as an elaboration of ‘by myself’ but as a separate protasis, thus implying that Oedipus believes that he does have one. Such an interpretation of the sentence seems, indeed, illogical in *conscious* terms, since in the same note Gould informs us, in an attempt to save the meaningfulness of the passage, that

The word translated as ‘key’ [‘clue’ in our version] is *symbolon*, which is a fragment of some small object (such as dice or knuckle bone), the rest of which was kept by a *xenos* (stranger-friend). A messenger could present the missing *symbolon*; if the two fitted, it was accepted as proof of the man’s identity and good faith [...] There may be a sense here, therefore, that Oedipus has a token by which he will discover his true family. It may be that we are supposed to think of the crippling or disfiguring marks on his feet. (221, 42-3, Gould)

We are, indeed, supposed to think at several significant moments about those marks on Oedipus’ feet, but the particular moment of Oedipus’ proclamation does not seem to be

one of them (unlike that of Jocasta's mention of the crossroads and exposure of the baby, which we have already looked at). The image of the one-time pierced ball-joints of Oedipus ('*arthra*') may indeed come to the mind of an informed, searching audience – but in the context of Oedipus' own vision of the situation at that very moment the link is associated with another (*unconsciously* connected) image of his relation to the city, the central one through which Oedipus passes in a kind of symbolic rebirth in his proclamation. Because the ambiguity of this link (or rather a whole network of them) does not yet reach his consciousness, the unconscious implications here achieve an extraordinary level of fantasmatic resonance (much stronger than that of the unmentioned pierced ankles alone), comparable but also exceeding that of the line where he says that he heard all about Laius but never met him in person. This link is, of course, Jocasta – not only the one whom he did meet in person but also the one whom he, as in the case with Laius, did not. The ambivalence of her image as a link to the city is compounded by its function in Oedipus' mind, that of his symbolic rebirth as Laius' absent son.

But, to start with, Jocasta is the *súmbolon*, or rather a part of it, the 'fragment' of the city and Laius' power that makes Oedipus a *complete* Theban. The multiple connotations of his identification with Laius through Jocasta in this passage are hard to render adequately into English. Oedipus feels obliged to search for the murderers of Jocasta's previous husband not only because the god 'had *driven*' him now to this 'deed' ('*tò prâgma theélaton*', 255 – which is a first, highly *daimonic*, verbal expression here), but also because the city should have done it *long* before (thus the god is driving him, as it were, simultaneously back in time towards the event and forward to Oedipus' final revelations – which is another key *daimonic* motif in the speech): 'it was not proper of

you to leave the murder of your noble king [*basiléōs*] unpurified'! ('*akátharton humâs eikòs hēn hoútōs eân,/ andrós g' aristou basiléōs t'olōlotos*', 256). And as he now possesses the most significant and the *only* remaining token of that murdered king's power, to the best of his (and everyone's, except Teiresias') knowledge – that is, his 'bed' and 'his wife sharing our seed' ('*léktra kai gunaîch' homósporon*', 260) – he feels a special duty to undertake the neglected task. It is remarkable that at this point there is no question for him of connection between this neglect and his acceding to Laius' position. That is, not at the conscious level, since his elaboration of the materiality binding him to act as avenger does not stop here. He moves into what Gould calls 'an extraordinarily compact example of unintentional double meaning' (n.261, 46), to which Jebb also pays attention, adding a laconic 'ghastly' (n.261, 46).

The Greek word *homósporon* means literally 'of the same seed' and thus is primarily used in reference to siblings. Oedipus, however, is using it, consciously, to suggest a common bond between him and Laius specifically through children, and not just Jocasta, which they both *could* have had by Jocasta, had Laius and his hope of offspring, as he puts it, not met with bad luck:

it's I who have the power that he had once,
 and have his bed, and a wife who shares our seed,
 and common bond had we had common children
 (had not his hope of offspring had bad luck –
 but as it happens, luck lunged at his head):
 because of this, as if for my own father,
 I'll fight for him (259-65, Gould)

The unconscious truth here is over-entwined. Jocasta is, certainly, a *homósporos* of both Oedipus and Laius, but the final position of that word makes Oedipus' verse sound as if his wife, Jocasta, was only *his homósporos*, that is, apparently, 'descended' from 'the

same seed' with him (which, to a degree, she certainly is since they all go back to Cadmus). But the main issue here is the fact of the peculiar absence-presence of *Laius'* seed in the equation. The proximity between himself, Laius and Thebes, is created for Oedipus by *his* children (*paídōn*) with Jocasta and *Laius'* ones by her, had he had any – at which point, as Gould notes, we are reminded of the gap between Oedipus' knowledge and, at least, Jocasta's knowledge. But besides this apparent factual gap in Oedipus' knowledge about Laius' status as a father, Oedipus' Greek here, as Jebb points out, is 'carefully framed so as to bear a second [a different and more linking] meaning' (n.261, 46). In Gould's translation Oedipus says 'it's I who have his power...the bed...and a wife' and 'common bond had *we* had common children', whereas in the original the reduplication of commonality in '*common* bond' and '*common* children' ('*koinōn te paídōn koína*', 261) comes *before* the implication of Laius as a 'father' in this 'offspring' bond ('*keínō génos*', 261). Thus, before that moment, the Greek verses sound like 'it's I now who have his power, his bed and a wife who shares our seed and common bond with [my] children' ('*egō /mèn archàs hàs ekeînos eîche prîn,/ echōn... léktra kai gunaîch' homosporon,/ koinōn te paídōn koin' an*', 258-61) – which, even if impossible, according to Oedipus' conscious knowledge and wish, is exactly what he was trying to negate through his abandonment of Corinth.

Oedipus is, certainly, aware of this absence/presence of the father, which is, indeed, the point of his declaration. But how is he dealing with it? The verb in the first person singular present, '*kurō*' (*kureō*), through which Oedipus describes his accession to Laius' power, bed, and wife, and which Gould renders in the impersonal 'as it happens [it's I who have' etc]', has a distinct connotation of hitting, hitting the mark right (Liddell and Scott). This stands in a direct and, of course, unconscious relation to

Oedipus' description of Laius' frustration as a father – in which case, again, 'as it happened, luck lunged at his head' (263, Gould – 'nûn d' es tò keínou krât' enélath' hē tûchē'). Here is where we get the relation to Oedipus' later description of the encounter at the triple-road with 'the old man' who 'brought his goad with two teeth down full upon my head' (807-9, Jebb, '[...] m' ho présbus [...] meson/ kára diplois kentrousí mou kathiketo') – as well as the metaphorical reference to the pierced ankles of the exposed baby. And though the reduplication of 'as it happens/ed' in Gould's translation does not correspond to an analogous verbal repetition in Greek (except for the adverb 'nûn', now), nevertheless, together with a lengthy note on the suggestive use of verbs with the connotation of hitting/lunging/swooping/(sexually)penetrating (p. 46-8), it alerts the reader to what Gould presents as a violent merging of the father, mother, son, and Apollo in one *daimonic* lunge, a violent *zeugma*, where each of the three members plays the role of the same predicate for the other two (Jocasta being the most conspicuous one at the moment), which is developed as the central metaphorical motif of the tragedy. The impersonality of the English 'it' in 'as it happens' refers to what looks in Greek like a trans-personal mingling of the human agency through/with the *daimonic* 'luck' (*tûchē*).

Echoing the passage analysed earlier where Jocasta tells Oedipus to absolve himself from Teiresias' accusations of killing Laius, thus coming very close to (a negative) identification of him with her (reportedly) dead son, Oedipus, in his proclamation to avenge Laius, indeed, absolves himself from 'hitting' (*kurein* 258) at Laius' power, place, and wife by displacing the fatal 'lunge' at his head ('enélatha', 263) onto 'luck' ('tûchē', 263). But, as we saw, he also unconsciously identifies with it. The image of lunging at one's head, notably, suggests Oedipus' later recall of his encounter at the cross-roads in which, he will consciously fear, he may have *become* that

'luck', after he was himself lunged at by the man in the chariot. He will certainly need to defend himself against this fear, and the defence will again be based on the link to Jocasta. But there is a remarkable difference between the two cases: in the proclamation, Oedipus absolves himself from 'hitting' at Laius' position, not only vowing to be an avenger for him on the basis of a would-be bond but actually offering himself as a substitution for its 'unfortunate' (*dustúchēn*) absence:

because of this, as if for my own father,
I'll fight for him (264-5, Gould)

and all the rest of Laius' predecessors on Theban throne. Thus, Oedipus sees *himself* as the missing common bond between Laius, Laius' ancestors and...himself. In other words, he vows to restore Laius as a father. It is also only the *delay* of 'luck' that stands between them, which Oedipus (paradoxically) is eager to reduce to an absolute minimum by taking up the position of the avenger (having already 'hit upon' the wife and place of the victim). This 'luck' is key to his self-identification (now and till the last scenes in the play) as Laius' son-substitute, which, through the mental distance between him and Laius' real son, allows him to mirror the unthinkable, predicted to him by the oracle. Thus 'luck' and negation appear in the context of this tragedy as the two hypostases of the same *daimonic* phenomenon.

When Jocasta comes on stage, in her very first scene – to which we can now come for a more informed comparison – the distinction between the circumstances of the 'luck' and Laius' son is immediately thrown into a sharper and more paradoxical focus. If Oedipus, in posing himself as the avenger of Laius, identifies with Laius' ('never-born') offspring and *opposes* himself to the fatal 'lunge' of 'luck', Jocasta's speeches, effectively (and ominously), reverse Oedipus' identification in this opposition.

As we saw already, Jocasta's mentioning of the crossroads shakes Oedipus profoundly. By asking questions about the exact place and time of murder, as well as about Laius' appearance and manner in which he traveled, Oedipus is shaken even more because now he is forced to realise that not only his insight may be wrong in general but that Teiresias could have been right in a very particular sense, because Oedipus did kill a man and a retinue who seem to match Jocasta's description of Laius. Therefore, he may *become* the murderer he has been looking for. But there is still a small but, nevertheless, a significant hope for Oedipus: the question of the number of killers. He knows that he was the only killer and that he killed all of the men in that encounter. Jocasta (and earlier Creon) says that Laius was murdered by *many*, not *one*, which was reported by a sole survivor – whom Oedipus wishes to see immediately. Jocasta promises that his wish will be promptly fulfilled but is, again, behind her husband on the unexpected details of his ever-growing misgivings and desperate hopes. This is why he needs to tell her the story of his leaving Corinth and coming to Thebes – presumably, with the earlier undisclosed detail of his encounter at the crossroads. Or is it simply to refresh Jocasta's memory of something he told her long ago but which has now been long forgotten or altered in her mind?

Her memory of those events seems, indeed, curiously muddled – if only in relation to Creon's recollection of them. When Oedipus, before starting the story of his Delphi visit, asks if the sole survivor of Laius' encounter with the murderers is still 'by chance... in the palace' (757), Jocasta answers with an emphatic negative ('*ou dēt*', 758), and she appears to remember vividly the reason for his absence:

When he returned and saw
you had the power of the murdered Laius,

he touched my hand and begged me formally
to send him to the fields and to the pastures,
so he be out of sight, far from the city.
I did. Although a slave, he well deserved
to win this favor, and indeed far more.

(Gould, 758-64)

The recollection is certainly ‘vivid’, as Gould notes on the passage, although ‘not of the whole sequence of events, but solely of the surviving servant’s departure’ (n.758, 98). Indeed, what is omitted – or rather confused – here is the chronology of Laius’ murder, the servant’s return, and Oedipus’ arrival, not to mention the arrival of the Sphinx somewhere in between, for whose ravaging of the city, as Gould notes at another point, Sophocles could not have allowed more than a day or two (!) (n.567, 78). As we have observed earlier, according to Creon, Laius went ‘to see a sacred rite’ (to be a ‘*theorōs*’, which must mean Delphi), then the servant returned and told everyone that Laius was killed by *many* (robbers), not *one*, and the city tried to look into the murder – at which point the Sphinx arrived and ‘made them look to what lay at their feet’ (‘*tò pròs posì skopeîn*’, 130-1), that is herself rather than Laius’ death abroad. Then Oedipus came along and solved the Sphinx’ riddle. However, this did not result in resuming the search for Laius’ killers, but in his being married to Jocasta, since which time no one has, apparently, given the murdered king another thought – until the plague and Creon’s visit to Delphi. If we look at this (Creon’s/official) version of the chronology of the events, nothing in it, except for the apparent brevity of the Sphinx’s ravaging Thebes and the unexplained but palpable disregard for the perished Laius, seems implausible at all.

However, according to what Jocasta has just told Oedipus, it looks like the servant-survivor, who informed everyone about the king’s death, returned to Thebes *after* Oedipus. This has to mean that Creon lied about the investigation and that the

Sphinx's role in ravaging Thebes was even more expressly to lure Oedipus into the trap of marrying Jocasta and in burying the investigation into Laius' death as deep as possible, instead of reviving it. However, both Gould and Jebb agree that Jocasta's short recount of those events should not be taken at face value. While admitting that the passage reflects Jocasta's peculiar focus on the servant and the link between Oedipus' arrival to Thebes and Laius' death in her mind, Gould does not have much use for the question of chronology here: 'If the way that Jocasta recounts the story is a little vague, that is just what we should expect, considering her ignorance of the connection between the two main events' (n.758, 97). In comparison, Jebb does not think Jocasta is to blame for this lack of consistency: it is Sophocles who 'has neglected clearness on a minor point', because he 'was *here* thinking of the man [servant] as coming back to find Oedipus already on the throne, and had overlooked the inconsistency' (n.758, 104, 105). But can there be a meaningful relation between Jocasta's 'minor' distortion of chronology and her focus on the servant's reaction to Oedipus taking Laius' throne in the context of such swift forgetting of the late king? Gould assumes Jocasta's point of view to interpret the meaning of this relation: 'She remembers that he asked to be sent out as a shepherd and that he wanted to be out of sight of the city. (She supposed, we may imagine, that he was grieving for Laius, nothing else)' (Gould, n.758, 97). We, indeed, may – but even Jocasta implies by the end of her narrative that there is more to servant's request than may meet the eye of our straightforward imagination. 'Although a slave, he well deserved/ to win this favor [to be sent away], and indeed far more' – this is how she explains the servant's current absence from the house (at the end of the passage quoted above). Oedipus cannot know what desert on the servant's part Jocasta is exactly referring to – indeed, he, again, thinks (and now even hopes) he has never met

the man. This time *he* is behind Jocasta on the details of her secret story: the servant was the man to whom Laius and she *specifically* (as will follow from the servant's later account) entrusted the exposure *and* killing of their mutilated baby, who was 'predicted to kill his father' ('*kteneîn nin toûs tekóntas ên lógos*', 1176 – or rather his 'parents', as *tekóntas-tekóntes* is plural). This, indeed, must be his big service to them – the servant was the guarantor of Laius' (and Jocasta's) life, his *talis-man* – that is the one who 'completes the ritual' (*telesma – telos*). The word by which the servant is designated as the *dramatis persona*, *therapōn*, develops the ambivalence of this meaning in the specificity of the context. While *therapōn* does mean 'the one who serves; the one who attends', even a 'courtier', it also has a second, ironically related, and thus, reverse meaning. In this case, it is the association of *therapōn* with 'surgical treatment' (*therapeía – therapōn*, the one who performs it), which may be seen as referring to his complicity in the exposure of the mutilated baby, the excision of a threatening tumour, as it were, and thus the 'completion of the [cleansing] ritual' that does away with the threat and helps the parents to avoid pollution. But it also and more relevantly refers (as we will see) to his giving the baby away for his feet to be *unpinned* by another (Corinthian shepherd), who becomes Oedipus' own *therapōn* and thus completes the reversal of Laius' ritual. Here the connotation of 'serving' in this word does not only refer to attending to the will of the human master, but, significantly (and this is the primary meaning in Liddell and Scott), to doing service to the *gods* ('*theos*', '*daimona*', Liddell and Scott) – which is what he, indeed, ends up substantially performing through his *therapeutic* service both to the father *and* to the son.

In Jocasta's recounting of his departure after Oedipus' accession to power, the servant must be associated, certainly, with the first type of service – that is, the one to

the father *against* the son (and Apollo's oracle). But the discrepancy between the value of this service and the final *reward* which the servant is asking for – the voluntary exile from the city – cannot escape Jocasta's notice. She almost notes, too, in this passage that it is hardly a reward at all – rather, it is a self-punishment (whose specificity, 'to be as far as possible from the sight of the city' of Thebes ('*hōs pleîston eîē toûd' ápoptos ásteōs*', 762), will resonate strongly with Oedipus' own self-punishment at the end). And her acceptance of the servant's plea and report without any questioning points to her unconscious appreciation – and repression – of the ambivalent sense of completion *and* failure of the ritual by the *therapōn*. On the one hand, after Laius is murdered, the *therapōn* comes to insist that it was done by *many*, not *one* – his insistence on this particular feature to the exclusion of the rest cannot be particularly meaningful or helpful, unless it suggests a reference to the 'one' he was supposed to do away with long ago on his secret mission, which can only be understood by Jocasta. It is for her that he must be insisting on this *many* versus *one* killer, trying to imply that he has fulfilled his mission faithfully. However, it is exactly in Jocasta's peculiar chronological placing of the event that this insistence acquires a specific sense of failure, because it is *after* the servant sees the one who took Laius' place that he asks to be sent far away from the city, never to see or be seen in it again. Whether or not the servant has actually lied about the number of assailants in his account of Laius' murder is thus not important at all – indeed, in this dramatization of the myth the servant is never made to retell the story of the murder. Instead, what is important at the moment is Jocasta's tacit/unconscious recognition (and, in a sense, reward) of the *therapōn*'s failure in his service to Laius. Even if this, consciously, is a recognition of his failure only in a general, symbolic sense (with Gould's 'grieving and nothing else' as Jocasta's appreciation of the servant's

motive), the other part of his service – unknown to Jocasta but also repressed by her as a wish – the one rendered to the *daimon* (in which the baby was saved and Laius' ritual was undone) is also very palpable in her recount. The condensed chronology of the servant's gesture of withdrawal by touching her hand (which evidently fuses the moment of servant's arrival and departure which took place, respectively, *before* and *after* the arrival of Oedipus) helps Jocasta fulfil her (unconscious) desire through the *hand(s)* of the other.

This desire will resound more strongly when Oedipus finishes his own agitated account of his encounter at the cross-roads with the old stranger and his arrogant retinue on his way from Delphi to Thebes. We have referred a lot to this central episode of the tragedy throughout our analysis and we will return to it once again later. Now the important aspect which needs to be emphasized in the context is, again, Jocasta's reaction to it. What Oedipus relates in his encounter at the crossroads is, indeed, dangerously close to the murder of Laius. It is difficult to believe that Jocasta does not appreciate it. On the contrary, the paradox of her reaction to the new light in which this incident appears at this moment in time, after all the preceding scenes and especially her account of Laius' murder, is that she seems very prepared to accept Teiresias' alleged truth behind it, i.e. that it was, indeed, *Laius* whom Oedipus killed at the triple-road at Phocis. Oedipus himself is, of course, very much dismayed by the possibility of not being just a prophesied father-killer (without knowing clearly who his father is) but also an unwitting victim of his *own* curse on the killer of Laius. So, he reminds Jocasta, after he finishes his story, to send for the servant and confirm the account of *many* robbers against *one*. But she tells him not to worry because

He [the servant] told it as I told you. Be certain.

He can't reject that and reverse himself.
The city heard these things, not I alone.
But even if he swerves from what he said,
he'll never show that Laius' murder, Lord,
occurred just as predicted. For Loxias
expressly said my son was doomed to kill him.
The boy – poor boy – he never had a chance
to cut him down, for he was cut down first.
Never again, just for some oracle
Will I shoot frightened glances right and left.

Oedipus That's full of sense. Nonetheless, send a man
to bring that farmhand here.

(848-60, Gould)

Jocasta's reassurance here is, indeed, in Gould's figurative translation of '*kalōs nomízeis*' 'full of sense', which Oedipus, nevertheless, does not seem to fathom at the moment. The expression actually refers to 'custom' or 'habit' (*nomízeis-nomos*), in other words, it should draw attention at this crucial point to the pattern in Jocasta's thinking which we have been tracing since the beginning of this section. The extraordinary result of this pattern here is that, in its conclusion, her demonstration that Oedipus could not have killed Laius actually includes and even, to some extent, depends on the very possibility of this fact, because, even if the servant does 'swerve' ('*ektrépō*', 851) in his account of the number of killers (which tips the balance of evidence towards Oedipus), it will make it even harder, as Jocasta (reasonably) thinks at the moment, for the oracles (let alone for the servant's report) to make sense. Hence the oracular Teiresias should not be trusted, and Oedipus did not kill Laius?

While this should, presumably, be the thrust of her argument, Jocasta's real focus is on her *own* son and the fact that he, in Gould's ingenious translation, 'never had a chance' to do that ('*ou keínos g' ho dústēnós pote [katektan']*', 855-6, which literally refers to the 'unfortunate', 'wretched' one [who was killed first]). Jocasta's phrasing is telling of her regret for this fact (it is the child, not Laius, whom she calls 'unfortunate'

here), *and* also, significantly, of her distinct, yet never uttered, acceptance of Oedipus as a son-substitute – only this time not as the avenger of the father (as he proclaimed himself), but the avenger of the son, Laius’ not absent but *expelled*, ‘unfortunate’ seed which Oedipus vowed to substitute for. This desire for the son-avenger, while reversing Oedipus’ identification in comparison to his proclamation, certainly, depends for Jocasta on the possibility of corporeal differentiation (which allows the fantasmatic fusion) between the substitute and the original son. This is where her and Oedipus’ desires meet and, enhanced by the mutual reflection, become, indeed, ‘full of sense’, or ‘habit’ (*nomos*) – the habit of negation. What Oedipus cannot appreciate in his cursory (as Jebb says, ‘almost mechanical’, n.859, 116) praise of Jocasta’s reasoning now, because of his preoccupation with the number of killers and the danger of having to abide by his own curse, is that after the exchange of their oracle-negating narratives, Jocasta has just made a conclusion that not only reflects the intersection of their desires for avengers-substitutes but reveals their approaching the point of collision and no return due to their contrariety.

By insisting on sending for the servant, Oedipus shows that he does not really comprehend (and accept) Jocasta’s point about the immateriality of the number of assailants. He does not seem to understand now that the number itself is purely incidental to the fundamental issue which both he and Jocasta have been negating in the oracularly predicted crimes all along, that is their *identificatory* nature. To remind ourselves, Jocasta has just, effectively, claimed not only that the matter of the number is unimportant but that Oedipus’ innocence in the murder of Laius does not really depend on whether he actually committed it or not. On the contrary, the better if he *did*, because what they should be clinging to is the distinction in it between the *regicide* and *patricide*

– the two crimes which the original prophecy specifically unites in relation to Laius. So what Oedipus should be concentrating on, according to Jocasta, is not the number but the difference in his identity from Laius’ ‘dead’ son, which, to the best of Jocasta’s conscious knowledge, is as sure as it can be (as opposed to the possible ‘swerves’ in the now old servant’s memory).

But, however reassuring she is trying to be, she has to insist, increasingly, on Oedipus’ keeping to the oracle-negation with the same composure. Because, as we have just found out, together with Jocasta in their exchange of the narratives, it is not just an excessive fastidiousness that makes Oedipus cling to the place *and* number in her account. Although he cannot yet envisage the possibility that he may actually be Laius’ son, we already know that he was once very uncertain about whose son he actually is. That uncertainty, as we remember, has led him to Delphi which, instead of clarifying the matter, predicted that he would commit parrincest. So now that Oedipus has already confessed that he did commit a murder of an *unknown* older man after that, Jocasta is trying to warn him that he should be worried about maintaining the difference between this murder (and his marriage) and the knowledge of predicted parrincest – and *not* necessarily about the truth, which they have been denied by the oracle in their respective circumstances. Or rather that they were, virtually, forced by the oracles to exchange their knowledge of truth for its negation, which now *is* their truth and should be maintained in order to keep at bay the intrusion of the oracular blame which is threatening to upset the balance of their lives.

Taking such an overtly consistent anti-oracular stance, Jocasta alerts us (if not Oedipus at this moment) to the deep identificatory meaning of the oracles and the particular figurative aspect of her and Oedipus’ attitude to them. As will become much

clearer at the moments of their respective self-punishments with which Jocasta and Oedipus react to the discovery of the full truth, they have been battling Apollo's oracles not only like humans but, significantly, like the Sphinx (curiously absent from the plot) – that is, with the riddle of their desire (the desire that is a riddle to *them* as well), which is seeking to drive a wedge of negation, in Jocasta's case, between Laius' killer and her own son, and in Oedipus' between him and the parrincest. It was, certainly, Apollo who originally challenged them with the riddle in his oracles which they dared to defy, thus assuming the Sphinxian status. Oedipus, at this moment, after he told Jocasta the story of his encounter at the crossroads, becomes her main asset in this *agon*, her ultimate weapon-riddle against both Laius and Apollo as the baby-expelling agents. And as we saw earlier, Oedipus presents Jocasta in his proclamation as the vital link to and locus of his alternative family, where he can allow himself, in a fantasy negating the oracle, to be both husband and (substitute) son to the murdered sonless king.

However, the conjunction of their narratives now also reveals the specific vulnerability of the Sphinxian stance which, while apparently challenging the god's insight and acumen, has, in fact, submitted to and been transformed by his transgressive vision. Jocasta's effective insistence, after she hears Oedipus' story, on keeping the distance between him and her 'dead' son is both right and fatal because the patricidal identity of the son is the point of convergence between her and Oedipus' oracles – the point to which Oedipus has now come dangerously close, even if he does not yet fully realise this. The particular danger of his case is that the identificatory nature of the crimes in his oracle is wider and includes not only the patricidal but also the fully incestuous, *maternal* (and as we will see later, *matricidal*) identification of the same son. This is why Jocasta's insistence on keeping the distance between *her* son and Oedipus'

involvement in the murder of Laius is of paramount importance for the success of her counter-oracular struggle: for as she dismisses all the oracles on the basis of one, then if that one proves true and Oedipus is her surviving son, all other oracles must then be true as well.

Furthermore, according to the same synecdoche of her dismissal, we can see that the negating divide penetrates the key oracles themselves: not only is the murder of Laius real and correlative to the murder of the old man by Oedipus but both these murders have an *undiscovered/unwitting* quality about them (with regards to the killer(s) and the victim(s) respectively). This latter quality pertains exactly to the nature of inevitability of the identification in the oracles because they never *name* the victim(s) and killer(s) but define them through their *unnamed* participation in the transgressive *act*. This is why oracles are only *partially* untrue and why Jocasta will keep advising Oedipus to stop searching for truth *as such*, because the truth in their case remains fundamentally oracular and knowing it cannot mean anything but recognition of parrincest. Ironically, by bringing the story of the exposed baby to corroborate this view, she has gone already half way towards the encounter with this truth, where she will be met by the well-meaning Corinthian messenger (Oedipus' other *therapōn*), who appears, significantly, right after another of her ironic steps – the supplication to Apollo to allay Oedipus' anxiety. The messenger has come to announce the death of the father and to relate it to the birth of the son – precisely the link which Jocasta has been striving to repress so strongly, and which could only be convincingly revealed to her through the other's *unwitting* knowledge.

The consistency of Jocasta's peculiarly divided agnosticism towards the oracles is emphasized in a broader structural sense by the fact that she and Laius' servant (the

original *therapōn*), the former giving Oedipus life and then giving him away and the latter saving him also to give him as far away as possible, are played by the second actor (*deuteragōnistés*). This actor also plays the palace Messenger (*exaggelos*) reporting Oedipus' self-blinding at the sight of Jocasta's suicide (which provides another link between Oedipus' self-blinding and the *therapōn*'s self-exile as the acts reflecting their proximity to the unbearable). This is also the actor that appears at the palace's steps in the very beginning as the Priest of Zeus (*hiereus*), the one who gives voice to the land's affliction and death and who is also prepared to overlook a certain unusualness of quasi-religious supplication to a human ruler, provided that he secures the much-needed alleviation of the suffering. The significant common line between all these four characters is a distinct sympathetic link to Oedipus (especially as a *son*) and in the readiness to disregard, disavow the *daimonic*/oracular insight in his favour, 'to endure in silence' (*phérein [...] sigê*), as the Chorus refers to Jocasta living with Oedipus all those years at 1211-12), even to accept the fulfilment of the oracles and turn a blind eye, especially to the patricidal part in them, so long as the truth never breaks out, stays dark, its segments in the various oracular messages unconnected, 'unyoked', by means of the compromise figure of the substitute-son (instead of the transgressive father). All the three major characters played by this actor – Jocasta, Laius' servant, and the palace Messenger – will try to stop Oedipus from learning the truth, already evident to *them*.

But this agnosticism, uneasily divided between sympathy towards Oedipus and lack of it towards the oracle, most notably in Jocasta (but also in the servant), certainly prepares its own as well as Oedipus' downfall in its preference for the substitute-son in and by whom the violated father and the oracle are repressed. The dark sense of the oracular, *daimonic* messages, involved in this version of the myth, is, indeed, to drive

home the condition of the violated and displaced father which causes the plague and barrenness in Thebes while also causing the blinding of the son's (Oedipus') mind, first figuratively, then literally, in their unconscious traumatic clash. And even darker is the realisation that this violation and repression of the father through the son (substitute) in Thebes has been part of both maternal *and* paternal characters and desires all along. We have just seen that, however different may Oedipus' and Jocasta's implications be in relation to the murder of Laius, they both seem to converge on the desire to rehabilitate the son, at least, no *less*, if not more, than the murdered king as a father. While the heavier preference for the son-substitute has just become evident in the case of Jocasta, it is also true about Oedipus, who, by avoiding Apollo's parrincestuous oracle, has not only been trying to save *them* but also *himself* as a *good* son. But the crucial dramatic difference in his case will be to reveal to Jocasta and to us that the rehabilitation of the son is *impossible* without the rehabilitation of the (violated) father, and that it is, indeed, only an accident, *luck* – in other words, a certain impossibility *and* inability/unwillingness of the mind to perceive, a *lack of insight* – that has kept the two lines of desire separate in consciousness.

Thus, what both Oedipus and Jocasta are about to discover, in a deeply symbolic way, is the mystery of the conjunction between a mutual love/relation (expressed by the same word *philos*) and mutual transgression/betrayal (*kakos*), especially to and against the father and son, who get displaced from the reality of existence, seemingly, altogether. In Jocasta's case the revelation can be characterised as somewhat less symbolic because she does get an empirical, unequivocal proof that her second husband is actually her own son from the first one. But the mystery is still there because this revelation throws light upon her participation in the act of the baby's exposure – that is,

her defiance of the oracle, as already an indication of the unconscious desire to displace the father, both in the figure of Laius and Apollo (whose oracle provoked it) and to have the son return from the exposed/dead in his father's stead. In a broader context of our inquiry into the oracular logic of desire in this section, it is evident that neither Laius nor Jocasta realises that their exposure of the baby with yoked feet as an attempt to thwart the oracle is already a physical metaphor, or more precisely, a metaphorically *zeugmatic* consummation of the predicted transgression against *both* of them as 'parents' ('*tekontes*', to whom Laius' servant will refer in his recount of the oracle at 1176). Their piercing and yoking of the ball-joints (*arthra*) on the baby's feet is thus, unconsciously, not so much a transgression against the son and the oracle but, in and through his body, it is, *inseparably* and *inevitably*, a transgression against *themselves* as the father and mother – which the oracle indeed predicted in its own negated form.

In the son's case, this mystery is no less dark and convoluted, especially in relation to his alleged patricide, since it comes across for Oedipus, *primarily*, at a figurative (that is, synecdochically oracular) level: it is his discovery of himself as an incestuous husband-son, who 'should never have been born' ('[...]*phús t' aph' hōn ou chrēn*', 1184), that precipitates the recognition of his father in the one whom he unknowingly murdered and *unwittingly* replaced in Jocasta's bedroom, and the one who almost murdered *him* twice. The crucial question 'who killed Laius?' is, indeed, never posed to the single (other) surviving witness of *all* the crimes, Laius' *therapōn*. If we accept the role of negation in the oracular logic of the human and daimonic interaction in this tragedy, then, it is clear that Laius, just as Oedipus, could not blame anyone but himself – his unconscious – for his reaction to Apollo's message. But one can, presumably, argue here, too, that Sophocles and Oedipus have 'neglected clearness on a

minor point', or, indeed, that the absence of this crucial question in the play is a sign of the radical reversal of the oracular synecdoche in Sophocles' treatment of the myth, which, through this omission, may be saying that Oedipus may have never killed Laius and, perhaps, may have never been the exposed infant, because of the general unreliability of knowledge and witnesses in this tragedy and the peculiarly oracular logic of convictions. Ahl's and Goodhart's arguments, which propose to read Sophocles' intentions here along this general line, suggest that this tragedy is meant to question the audience's receptivity towards Oedipus' myth, the oracular character of its truth, and, effectively, convict the *audience*, instead of Oedipus.

These scholarly refutations of Oedipus' self-conviction may be convincing in their attention to the problematic moments in Sophocles' dramatic appropriation of this myth and its reception but, nevertheless, they have to rely on the myth's own framework in order to refute or question it. They may be extending and radicalising their critique of it, but their own position reflects that of Jocasta in relation to Oedipus in the central episodes we have been discussing in this section. Therefore, fundamentally, the violent mystery of the negating relations within the family triangle – or rather quadrangle, to include Apollo's crucial influence – the fusion of the impossibility and inevitability of the transgressive insight into one's origins, the penetration of the *daimonic* word into and its mingling with the human body, in literally mutilating, sexual, and metapsychological sense, remain untouched. And it is this self-violent but *not* self-enclosed and hence enigmatic, unsolvable mystery that Oedipus (and the audience) is drawn more and more strongly to identify with at the end of the play. It exists, indeed, only as negative fragmentation – that is, the fragmentation which negates itself, simultaneously scattered in 'fragments', 'clues' (*súmbolon*) and coagulating its own

irretrievability into the elusive, tantalizing presence. This results in both the deeply sexualized and annihilating connection between spatially, temporally, psychologically (as in *psuchē*, which here stands both for 'life' and 'soul'), and morally distinct relations – the humanly embodied *daimonic* link which turns the familial, cross-generational triangle into the uncertainly polygonal, contagious, *zeugma*.

Despite the profound involvement of all the three main familial parties in the conflict of the truth and desire in relation to the oracular intervention, Sophocles' *Oedipus* is specifically centred on the problem of the father – it is in relation to the father that the oracle first manifests itself, and, although Laius' reaction to the oracle (let alone that of Jocasta, the servant, and, later, that of Oedipus) seems to be centred on and against the *son*, in reality (as we have already suggested) he reacts no less against *himself* as a father by exposing the baby, thereby substantiating the message of the oracle. Just as Jocasta may present herself now as wishing for the return of her exposed son from the dead (and, thus, displacement of the father), Laius, in his turn, by permanently disfiguring the baby but *not* killing it *himself*, seems to be wishing for his return as well, that is, for his own death, which, thus, aligns itself with Jocasta's unconscious by displacing his pollution onto his servant and *inscribing* it into his son. This negative survival of the father as the ghost of his pollution *within* and *through* the son and mother appears to be the key oracular and tragic motif in the play (which culminates in the twin self-punishment of Oedipus and Jocasta in the parental bedroom).

Apollo's central oracle, the one given to Oedipus, which he recounts in the spatial and temporal centre of the tragedy, concerns not only (and not so much) the fact that he would be his 'mother's lover' and be the 'murderer of the one whose seed' he is (in Gould's rendering of '*hōs mētrī mēn chreīē me michthēnai, phoneūs d' esoīmēn tou*

phuteúsantos patrós’) but, as we have emphasized in the previous section, that he ‘will show offspring to mankind they could not look at’ (*‘génos d’ átlēton anthrōpoisi dēlōsoim’ horân*’, 791-3). It focuses not only on Oedipus’ fathering children but also on the ambivalence of recognition and shunning in horror from the peculiar *impossibility* of the father in this offspring, his violated and negated, fragmented presence in the blood, which will transpire in the lack of distance between Oedipus and his children, Oedipus and Laius, within ‘great harbour’ (*‘hō mégas limēn*’, 1208) into which this lack of distance turns Jocasta. This focus is echoed and developed by the Chorus, who, right after Jocasta and Oedipus have finished the first round of their anxious revelations and oracular dismissals, appeal to the ‘one and only’ immortal ‘father’, Olympus (868-9), whose presence and essence seem to them to be called into question by Oedipus’ and Jocasta’s reasoning; and to Zeus, the all-mighty father of Apollo, whose oracles no longer seem to the mortals to fit the events and thus again point towards the father’s ‘dying’ together with the ‘dying oracles’ (*‘phthínonta gàr[...]/ thesphataí*’, 906-7). The cause of this dying, as many have noted, is related by the Chorus to Oedipus’ and Jocasta’s behaviour and revelations. The arguments *pro et contra* identification of Oedipus as the ‘tyrant’ whom his ‘hubris breeds’ (*‘húbris phuteúei túrannon*’, 873) in this famous choral ode often obscure an interesting paradox of the Chorus’ relation of this ‘*húbris*’ to ‘*pálaisma*’, ‘struggle’, ‘rivalry’. The Chorus is asking the gods not to ‘abolish’ the ‘rivalries’ of men ‘which are good for the city’ (*‘tò kalōs d’ échon/ pólei pálaisma mépote lúsai theòn aitoûmai*’, 879-80), but, more precisely, they imply that these rivalries will turn into ‘hubris’ if the god, the father, does not point out his eternal presence by somehow making up for the truth of the ‘dying’ old prophecies about Laius – in other words, by manifesting himself as the *absence* of certain sense, insight, in the

men 'struggling' with each other and against the oracles. That is, at this stage the revelation of the eternal father must involve and ensue from the revelation of hubris of Oedipus and Jocasta and Laius. And if we remember Apollo's oracles, the father in the oracular message there, represented by the 'immortal father' of the 'eternal' laws, has already and must now reveal himself through a *transgression*, a violation, against himself that links the three together but which cannot be restricted to their own human scope, simply because the initial arrival of the oracles and the eventual commitment of transgressions elude the conscious human grasp until the very end. The self-manifestation and incrimination of the father, for which the Chorus seem to be appealing at this crucial moment is, thus, grimly appropriate to the case because the ignorance of the humans concerns the immediate physicality of their only *half-unwitting* transgression against themselves (all the three knowingly defy the oracles), while it is clear that the *daimon* could have pointed out the real connections between the people involved without setting them on the transgressive path.

Quite in line with this unconscious plea of the Chorus for the father to reveal himself in his own punishment, Jocasta reappears right after their stasimon and in an ironic counterpoint appeals to Apollo, who is 'the nearest' (*'ágchistos'*, 919) to them, 'for a *cleansing* that will *not pollute him*' (*'hópōs lúsin tin' hēmìn euagē'*, 920-21, Gould) – that is Oedipus, who, despite Jocasta's reasoning, has been 'exciting his soul too much with alarms of all kinds' (914-15, Gould), while the Chorus was appealing to Olympus and Zeus. As an immediate response to this counterpoint of appeals to the father, there arrives the Corinthian messenger, who wishes the family and the house well. Apart from the unwitting connotations of the impossibility of such wish (concentrated in his unconscious punning on Oedipus' name (*Oidipou* in the dative) and

the interrogative ‘where’ (*hopou*), rejoined by the Choral punning on Jocasta’s marital and maternal relation to Oedipus (*‘gunê dê métēr hêde tōn keínou téknōn’*, ‘this is his wife and mother of his children’, 928, Gould), the messenger has consciously come to bring what he thinks is both a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ news – the passing away of the father, that is Polybus, whom Oedipus, despite his old uncertainty about his origins, still considers his progenitor. The Corinthian throne is now waiting for Oedipus and the messenger is hoping for a reward for his service. But, to his amazement, he learns that his news is thoroughly ‘good’ for Oedipus since it means a *painless* death of the father, ‘by his own destiny’ (*‘pròs tēs túchēs’*, 949) and not by Oedipus’ hand, as Jocasta puts it in her elated abandon. Oedipus joins in her elation, although we all know now that he is not at all sure that his father was Polybus. It is the painlessness of Polybus’ death that convinces him here, and it is the first very close indication of the mode in which Oedipus later recognises his *real* father.

However, the paradoxes do not stop for the messenger at Oedipus’ joy at Polybus’ death, whom Oedipus can now safely consider his father. To his amazement, he learns that the Corinthian throne as well as the return to Corinth is out of the question for Oedipus – that is, until Meropē, Polybus’ queen is still alive, for Oedipus still fears the predicted incest. This gives the Corinthian an opportunity to restore the favourability of his report of the painless death of Oedipus’ father. He is told that it is the link to his parents that has been bothering Oedipus since the oracle, so, he complements the report of the father’s painless death by dissolving this link, *both* to the father and mother, who, he says, are not Oedipus’ real, but adoptive parents. It is profoundly remarkable that at this crucial moment Oedipus, after he is presented with the Corinthian throne as an assuredly safe haven, does not even consider going there. Instead, he succumbs to the

search and retrieval of the murky clues about his origin, the path, which must now lead him away from that haven, to an almost assured disaster.

At this sudden turn of events, this last twist in Oedipus' journey towards the truth starts again with the mother sliding out of the focus for a while because, in response to his bewildered queries, the Corinthian puts *himself* next to Polybus in relation to Oedipus and reopens the line of paternal succession: he says that Polybus was no more father to Oedipus than he, the messenger, was:

Oedipus Do you mean Polybus was not my father?
Messenger No more than I. We're both the same to you.
Oedipus Same? One who begot me and one who didn't?
Messenger He didn't beget you any more than I did.
(1017-20, Gould)

Thus very quickly, with the help of Oedipus' oracular anxiety and paradoxical joy of reacquiring his uncertain father through the news of his painless death, the messenger returns Oedipus to the basic equation describing his father as a strange 'nobody'. In his question, Oedipus asks, literally, 'how can the one who begot me be equal to nothing' or the one 'who is nothing to me'? (*'kai pōs ho phúsas ex ísou tō mēdení;*', 1119) – and is enlightened by the messenger that this was made perfectly possible due to the *withdrawal* of Oedipus' real father, who must have disavowed and abandoned Oedipus to the care of three successive substitute fathers, the last and most real of whom was, of course, Polybus. The Corinthian explains that Polybus was taught by 'his own childlessness' to 'love' Oedipus as if his own begotten son (*'autòn apaidía' 'esterxen mega'*, 1024, 1023). It is a puzzle for Oedipus that a man could love a child received from someone else's hands (*'ap' allēs cheiròs'*, 1023). This puzzle, however, bears witness not to his cynicism but to the puzzle of the 'ancient trouble' (*'archaios kakon'*, 1033), the marks on the 'ankles of his feet' (*'podōn árthra'*, 1032), 'the tokens of

dreadful shame' (*'deinon g' óneidos spargámōn'*, 1035), which his real parents left him with. And as the Corinthian proves to him now, Polybus was, indeed, not privy to the secret of those marks. Neither is the Corinthian himself. However, what the Corinthian credits himself for over Polybus is the unpinning of Oedipus' feet, when, as he first says, he found him on the Cithaeron mountain (1026). After Jocasta's mentioning of the crossroads at Phocis, this is another crucial toponymic reference in the tragedy. This time it does not transfix Oedipus but Jocasta, who, when she reenters the dialogue thirty lines later, will already be devastatingly certain about the identity of Oedipus' progenitor.

There is a further symmetry in her and Oedipus' reaction to the Cithaeron toponym at this moment in that while Oedipus missed completely the yoked feet of the exposed baby in Jocasta's story which was obscured by the crossing of the roads, he now seems to be missing again the crucial and sinister movement in the Corinthian's story towards Thebes, in whose vicinity Cithaeron mountain lies. Instead, he is *now* concentrated on the meaning of the yoked feet, because he now recognises himself as the baby in the story – while Jocasta has already made the terrifying connection between the two stories. But Oedipus still lacks insight, so he asks the Corinthian, who is now forced to admit to the similar problem and curiously correct himself by saying that he was actually not the first to 'find' Oedipus on Cithaeron but only received him from *another* shepherd, 'one of Laius' men' (*'tōn Laiou dēpou'*, 1042). This, even more alarming signal of proximity to Oedipus' present situation, while certainly removing Jocasta's last doubts, spurs Oedipus on in his search – he asks about the shepherd and is told by the Chorus that the shepherd the Corinthian is talking about must be the one Oedipus has already sent for, the survivor of Laius' murder and the confidential exposé of Laius'

baby. Oedipus does not seem to make and ponder over this ominously involved connection but rushes onwards and is impatient to see the man and ask him the question about the identity of his father. For Jocasta, the father has already returned, in Oedipus' guise, now terribly transformed in her mind's eye, the 'great eye' which is 'the father's tomb' (*'megas g' ophthalmòs hoi patròs táphoi'*, 987) – the words she used about Polybus in the moment of her short-lived joy which are now revealing their other, terribly true sense, engulfing both her and Oedipus.

Characteristically, Oedipus misses the depth and vehemence of Jocasta's sudden 'wild grief' at the Corinthian's revelations - *'agriàs lupēs'*, literally, 'the grief of someone who lives in the fields', thus 'savage, wild', which will, indeed, prepare the reentrance of *deuteragonistēs* as Laius' servant, who returns from wilderness, after Jocasta rushes in to hang herself. Despite the fact that his search for his ancestry has now virtually come to Thebes, *rather* than Corinth, Oedipus still counts himself fortunate enough – the son of Fortune (*'paída tēs Týchēs'*, 1080) – to hope, with the new 'clues' (*'sēmeia'*, 1059), for a discovery of a miraculous ancestry at the end of the chain of substitute fathers. In other words, Jocasta's 'sickness' (*'nosos'*) and her calling him the 'un-fortunate one' (*'dústēne'*, 1071) is not enough for him to stop looking for the tomb of his real father, 'break forth what will!' (*'hopoía chrēzei hrēgnútō'*, 1076). The nearness of this tomb, as we have already noted, does not deter him but, to the contrary, exerts an irresistible, inevitable pull.

This is why he rushes through the interrogation of the Laius' old servant, who arrives after Oedipus' desperately defiant and Chorus' absurdly hopeful speeches about Oedipus' new ancestry. He cannot wait to get to the truth, he is so impatient as to threaten and most certainly apply torture to the old man, who is very anxious and

reluctant to talk – especially, after *he* understands the reason for his being summoned and has the full truth of the situation in front of his eyes well before his interrogator gets near it. This truth still blind to itself is, of course, Oedipus himself, desperate to learn the secret of his lame name. On the pain of death, the servant-shepherd finally concedes that Laius and Jocasta (specifically) entrusted him once with a baby (whose ankles he does not mention) whom he was supposed to ‘do away with’ (*analōsaimi*, 1174) – but whom he, out of pity, gave away to the Corinthian to raise as his foster-son far away from Thebes – and

If you are the one
he speaks of – know your evil birth!
(1180-81, Gould)
(*ei gàr hoûtos eî/ hón phēsin hoûtos,*
ísthi dúspotmos gegōs.)

These are the last words of Laius’ servant-shepherd, a response to the extraordinary last question of Oedipus in this episode, when he, already knowing the truth of his birth, still asks for the reason why the servant gave the baby away instead of killing it. Finally, Oedipus finds his father and, virtually, his tomb, the ‘great eye’, in his mother’s embrace, at the sight/site of his own conception, of his curse by the oracle, and exposure to its element. Together with the son, the dead father is re-exposed at the very centre of the son, mother, the children born from unwitting incest, and his ‘dead’ self as well as the oracle – which announced it from the very beginning in the ambivalent form of the nameless/naming act of his murder. The consummation of this act now is carried by Oedipus even further back in time, prior to the exposure of the baby – right to the time and place of his conception, Jocasta’s bedroom, where, according to the palace messenger, Oedipus rushes crying for a sword and where he, having broken through the

now revealingly forbidden double-doors of the bedroom, sees the sight of Jocasta hanging from the ceiling and blinds himself with two brooches that kept her dress together. The self-blinding and hanging, the *arthra*, ball-joints of Oedipus eyes, and the noose of twisted ropes for Jocasta's neck, are correlative in the re-exposition of the self-violating 'dead' father as the dark murdering lack circumscribed by the circumferences, which are filled, respectively, by Jocasta's surrendered life and Oedipus' surrendered sight. This conjunction of self-blinding and suicide presents the father's self-violation as constituted by these two acts involved with the mother's and son's bodies – that is, it finally shows that Laius' becoming a father in Jocasta's bedroom has both sealed and blinded him towards his destiny, to 'the place where three roads meet'. This scene also remakes the point of the fundamental *zeugmatic* and trans-personal character of this triple (rather than double) curse – that is, of the impossibility to ascribe it essentially either to the father, or mother, or the son, or even to the *daimon*, whose intervention can be counted as the alternative beginning of its transmission. The already negated character of the truth in the oracle shows that the oracular word itself is essentially incomplete and decentred with regards to its message. Sophocles' treatment of the myth thus depends vitally on negation for the revelation of truth, found both in the oracular messages and their human appropriation. And the key figure for the representation of this uncertainty is the father, the father as a specific condition of a missing, self-negating message. This mystery of the tormented and tormenting father, the great, terrifying, and un-closed 'eye' (*ophthalmos*) of his tomb, which opens for Oedipus and Jocasta within and without themselves, and which happens to have an apposite phonetic coincidence in English with the I (*egō*) of an individual – something that both Oedipus and Jocasta see engulfed by this tomb – seems to us the key phenomenon which substantially

corroborates Freud's well-known and disputed association between Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is with renewed attention to the suggestiveness of this association in the context of the theme of the father that we are going to turn to Shakespeare's tragedy in the next section.

3.1 Hamlet: Introduction

[*The Ghost*] *Spreads his Arms*

'One can but wonder at the number of critics producing 'new' readings of *Hamlet*. One feels they must believe that their readings are somehow exceptional.'
(Wagner, 'Losing the Name of Action' 135).

The recently prevalent tendency in approaching the Ghost in *Hamlet* has been to reduce its dramatic status to a manifestation of a certain external order of reference – in other words, to a complex *epigraph*⁶⁰. Doing the double justice to the complexity of the object in question and the requirements of the modern genre of critical theory, this order is usually not homogenous but a mixture of various uses of psychology, historicism, and modern approaches to text. It is necessary to acknowledge from the start that the following analysis of *Hamlet* will certainly not stray from this state of being 'to double business bound' in any 'exceptional' sense – *except* that it will confine explicit interrogation of various critical approaches to the play mainly to this introduction, so that, following the pattern of the previous section, the maximum of analytic attention is focused on the play itself.

A primarily textual emphasis of this analysis is warranted particularly in relation to *Hamlet* by the already mentioned reductive peculiarity of the recent studies, although, to be fair, it is hardly possible to qualify them as unambiguously reductive. On the contrary, it is a combination of suggestiveness and circumspection that characterises this

⁶⁰ Helpfully laid out in the *OED* as '[ad. Gr. ἐπιγραφή; inscription, f. ἐπιγράφειν to write upon, f. ἐπί upon + γράφειν to write. In Fr. *épigraphe*.] an inscription; esp. one placed upon a building, tomb, statue, etc., to indicate its name or destination; a legend on a coin'; 'the superscription of a letter, book, etc.; also, the imprint on a title-page. Obs.>'; 'a short quotation or pithy sentence placed at the commencement of a work, a chapter, etc. to indicate the leading idea or sentiment; a motto.'

tendency to leave the play, and particularly the protagonist and the Ghost, 'veiled', to use Garber's appropriation of Lacan's 'phallus' for her Ghost-centred reading of *Hamlet*.

A paradigmatic example of disquisition on the matter, *Hamlet in Purgatory* published by Stephen Greenblatt in 2001, squarely refuses to confront the Ghost while accumulating an array of fascinating material on the 'afterlife of Purgatory'. The mystery of the Ghost is all but exposed, at long last, in the penultimate chapter 'Remember Me'. In the section of that chapter entitled 'Uncertainty and Interrogation', Greenblatt dwells on the revulsion with which Hamlet views the corruption of the spirit 'mired in the flesh that will not melt away, that cannot free itself from longings for mother and lover, that stubbornly persists and resists and blocks the realization of the father's wishes'. The task of setting right the time that is 'out of joint', with which the father charges the son, 'is further complicated by the father's own entanglements in the flesh' (243). This is a characteristic example of psychological reduction of the problem in which the discussion assumes the identity between the author's and Hamlet's points of view – and thus it assumes the identity of the Ghost and the father, *as if* this were indeed the indisputable reality of the play.

This problematic assumption leads Greenblatt to finish this section with the Reformers' justification for the extensive dwelling on corruption which seems to tally well with the dramatic emphasis of the plot: 'The spirit can be healed only by refusing all compromise and by plunging the imagination unflinchingly into the rank corruption of the ulcerous place' (243-44). The 'primary and elemental nausea', the 'revulsion' that this plunging would provoke are here, according to Greenblatt, 'not an end in itself; it is the spiritual precondition of a liberated spirit that finds a special providence in the fall of

a sparrow, sacrificially fulfils the father's design, and declares that the readiness is all' (244). Having already assumed 'the father's design', Greenblatt immediately follows up with the anticlimactic moment of liberation where he summons the very spirit only to let it go without questioning:

But the problem is that the father's [i.e. the Ghost's] design is vengeance; vengeance, moreover, demanded by a spirit that seems to come from the place that was for Protestants a supreme emblem of the corruption of the Catholic Church. What can be made of this? The point surely is not to settle issues that Shakespeare has clearly gone out of his way to unsettle or render ambiguous. I am concerned, rather, with the particular uses that the playwright made of the struggle between Simon Fish and Thomas More and its aftermath.

(Hamlet in Purgatory, 244)

How can one be sure of the intent ('design') if the issues are unsettled and ambiguous?

The only logical way is assumption of authorial intent because design cannot both reveal itself as such and remain ambiguous.

Thus it is understandable how one could argue that the point of *Hamlet* is to forget about *Hamlet* as a play and turn to the historical issues of the day. After all, this is what the play itself seems to be demanding throughout, from Hamlet's proliferating self-accusations of 'thinking too precisely on the event' to the arrival of Fortinbras at the end. One could attempt to construe the crux of the Ghost's design and Hamlet's behaviour in this context as a means for the author to capitalise on the 'momentous public debate', the great 'ontological argument about spectrality and remembrance' (249) as such, well played out by the rhetorical joust between Fish and More. For, according to Greenblatt's vision of Shakespeare, which received its fullest elaboration to date in *Will in the World* (2004),

At a deep level there is something magnificently opportunistic, appropriative, absorptive, even cannibalistic about Shakespeare's art, as if poor, envious Robert

Greene, had sensed something more important than he knew when he attacked the “upstart crow, beautified with our feathers.” In the case of Purgatory, important forces had been busily struggling for decades to prepare the playwright’s feast. And the struggle did not end with the performance of the play or the playwright’s death.

(*Hamlet in Purgatory* 254)

The paradoxical conclusion that should be drawn from this passage is that *Hamlet* is really not about Hamlet at all; that the ‘playwright’s feast’ is ‘not where he eats, but where he is eaten’ by the ‘struggling’ of the ‘important forces’; and that, because Shakespeare, according to Greenblatt, only developed to the logical, secularising conclusion the theological and political tensions that had been rife in the 16th century England, the audience does not need to get involved with the issue of the Ghost’s design and Hamlet’s tragedy in the play as such.

To underscore those features of the Ghost that would conform to this vision, Greenblatt aligns it with ‘More’s poor souls’ who ‘cry out to be remembered, fear the dull forgetfulness of the living, disrupt the corrupt ease of the world with horrifying tales of their sufferings, lament the remarriage of their wives’. (249) This description is meant as a contrasting complement to John Foxe’s satirical attack against More whom he presents as making ‘the dead men’s souls [...] by a Rhetorical *Prosopopoeia*, to speak out of Purgatory pifold, sometimes lamentably complaining, sometimes pleasantly dallying and scoffing [...], sometimes scolding and railing at him, calling him fool, witless, frantic, an ass, a goose, a mad dog, an heretic, and all that naught is’ (250).

Despite the apparent intention, the contrast here is virtually non-existent because both descriptions – as well as much of the fascinating *pro et contra* Purgatory material in the previous chapters of the study – have nothing to do with the fundamental sticking point of the Ghost in *Hamlet* which Greenblatt leaves consciously aside: the Ghost does not so much ‘lament’ the remarriage but reviles it and demands vengeance. This is the

very dramatic catalyst that combines murder and sexuality into the 'revulsion' that fills the ear of Denmark and, by the time of the last scene, the eye of Denmark and the audience, *without* any clear promise of the 'liberated spirit'.

In *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (1996), John Kerrigan qualifies revenge as the perfect generator of the 'natural dramatic situation...of re-action' (4) which presents the author with the problem of 'prevent[ing] the material ramifying endlessly (as in an Icelandic saga)' rather than 'creat[ing] the events *ex nihilo*':

There is a sense in which theatrical doing gravitates, quite naturally, towards revenge...The most cerebral and perplexed revenge plays cannot escape from action as a principle' (5).

Although it is hard to miss the relevance of these observations to *Hamlet*, it is also hard to miss the reversed relation between revenge and the problem of dramatic proliferation there: the cerebrality and violence proliferate in a seeming contradiction to revenge. It is a commonly agreed fact that Hamlet manages to obliterate unnecessarily all but one major character, including *himself*, before he, literally, gets a *chance* to confront the perpetrator. Thus the deictic/creative quality of revenge that Kerrigan singles out as intrinsically germane to the mimetic nature of drama (17) is problematised together with that very nature: instead of 'creation *ex nihilo*' the revenge motif in *Hamlet* rather provides for a creation *ad nihilum*, tending towards but never reaching the point of vanishing.

Indeed, Denmark is not saved but implosively destroyed, and, although Fortinbras is there to 'claim the rights of memory' and man the empty throne, there is no suggestion of any difference – except, perhaps, in terms of heraldry – that he might bring. Even the obvious change in the power balance at the end of the final scene, which

recalls the final scene of *Oedipus*, is rapidly reversed: Fortinbras' first act as the bona fide ruler of Denmark, after giving the burial orders, is to sit down and listen to Horatio's *Hamlet*. And if we are meant to judge the impact of this story on Fortinbras by the subsequent destiny of the play, then it is difficult to imagine him making an easy appropriation of and a clean break from the memory that he has come to claim. Essentially, unlike Creon, he must still be sitting and listening to the story, wondering, perhaps, if he should 'settle issues that' Horatio as the bona fide Shakespeare 'has clearly gone out of his way to unsettle or render ambiguous'. That is, unless he has left the privilege to the audience and has gone off again 'with divine ambition puff'd' to fight for some new 'egg-shell'.

Valeria Wagner's sarcasm, evident in the epigraph, can be read not only with reference to the sheer quantity of scholarship on *Hamlet*. In another sense, it must be hiding the embarrassing admission that this virtual infinity of critical discourse trying to figure the play out, to rid Hamlet and the Ghost of their 'mystery' in more and more ingenious ways, is that 'rest' to which the angels have sung the young prince.

Greenblatt, apparently, comes to a very similar conclusion about Hamlet's state at the end of the play and his present situation. He finishes the chapter '*Remember Me*' with a section entitled 'The Old Snare' in which he attempts to produce a seemingly chilling effect, not unlike that of 'The Living Hand' of John Keats:

With the doctrine of Purgatory and the elaborate practices that grew up around it, the church had provided a powerful method of negotiating with the dead, or, rather, with those who were at once dead and yet, since they could still speak, appeal, and appall, not completely dead. The Protestant attack on the "middle state of souls" and the middle place those souls inhabited destroyed this method for most people in England, but it did not destroy the longings and fears that Catholic doctrine had focused and exploited. Instead [...], the space of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage where old Hamlet's ghost is doomed for a certain term to walk the night. That term has now lasted some four

hundred years, and it has brought with it a cult of the dead that I and the readers of this book have been serving.

(*Hamlet in Purgatory* 256-57)

In one sense, the chilling effect fails. It is because, unlike Keats, Greenblatt's exposition founders on the vagueness of 'the dead' that are 'not completely dead'. This is hardly his fault in view of the, presumably, never-ending legacy of 'exploitation' that he is dealing with; besides, even such eminent scholars as More, Foxxe, and others up till the present day have always been in dispute over the matter. However, the effect fails more precisely because in the context of Greenblatt's study, which accepts this legacy as Shakespeare's field of origin, the fact that the dead somehow retain the ability to move on stage, 'speak, appeal, and appall' is taken to suggest the possibility of negotiation – in other words, the liberating design, presented at length in the chapter on *The Gast of Gy*, and symbolized on the cover by the angels singing the souls of 'the dead/not completely dead' out of the painted darkness, through the funnel of light, into paradise. The Catholic exploitation of the 'longings and fears' is in this way given a tacit credit by presenting the Shakespearean and modern theatre, *as well as* literary criticism, as its bona fide secularised reincarnations. Thus, on the one hand, Greenblatt wants to scare the reader by revealing, *at the end of his book*, that we all must be living in and with Purgatory at least (because, as he himself notes, the issue of its boundaries with Hell is notoriously unsettled); on the other, he tempts us with the promise of bliss because theatre and literary criticism, embodied in his book, are presented as the rightful heirs of the Catholic 'cult of the ['not completely'] dead', who have been sobered up by the scholarly polemics but, nevertheless, managed to retain the precious key to salvation.

Accordingly, in the Epilogue to his study, Greenblatt, in effect, corrects our initial association between his closing metaphor in '*Remember Me*' and Keats'

uncompromising demand to grasp 'this hand' while it is still 'warm and capable' by providing one of his own which reveals Shakespeare's Prospero as the inspiration behind the image:

My ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

(*The Tempest*, Epilogue, ll.13-20)

Paradoxically, such a closing for a book on *Hamlet* revives, by the obvious repression, the very Keatsian image of us having to confront the dying, extremely unsettling prince and earlier the Ghost, neither of whom mentions or is concerned with 'prayers' or 'relief' as such. Rather than leaving them the ability to 'appall' and/in order to 'appeal' for intercession, their death is absolute and cannot be relieved. However, far from being the absolute end of existence, death takes them over and endows them with the power of absolute demand that, similarly to Apollo's oracles in Sophocles, is not open to negotiation or intercession. As in Keats, relief here is totally hypothetical. However, according to Greenblatt, instead of this disturbing image, we should imagine an actor (an audience-friendly equivalent for 'dead'/'not completely dead') who 'is not, of course, crying out from Purgatory; he is speaking from the stage. And in place of prayers, we offer the actor's ticket to bliss: applause' (*Hamlet in Purgatory*, 'Epilogue', 261). The life of this actor is 'little', 'such stuff/As dreams are made on', and is easily 'rounded' not with death but 'with a sleep' (*The Tempest*, 4.1.151-58). Greenblatt certainly tries to maintain the necessary pathos here by quoting Hamlet's famous lines

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause.

(3.1.68-70)
(*Hamlet in Purgatory*, 260)

But the connection is tenuous precisely because Prospero *does not (have to) die* at the end and we are not *demande*d to tell his story again. His misfortune, although certainly resonant of the central collision in *Hamlet*, never really breaks out of his narrative control and does not involve any of the crimes committed at Elsinore. It is a 'fable', avowedly much less real in dramatic terms precisely because of this lack of mortality. The only reality here is Prospero's awareness that the 'vision' he is part of is a 'baseless' and 'insubstantial pageant', capable of equally easy dissolution *and* recreation; instead of earnest prayers, all it needs is another round of applause – a fairly *reflexive* (that is, physically *self-centred*) gesture; it is as insubstantial as the pageant itself and, as Claudius' example amply demonstrates, the audience should be happy to provide it in return for being spared a real need to pray.

It is hardly possible to reconcile this kind of exchange between the audience and actors at the end of *Hamlet*, where applause seems incongruous at the very least because, as Horatio sums it up, the play has been a sequence

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads[...]
(5.2.363-67)

But, most importantly, it is incongruous because, as has been noted already in this and numerous other analyses, this is *not* the end but rather the *beginning* of *Hamlet's* plot.

This moment of

I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!
You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time –

(5.2.316-18)

is the root – or the ‘navel [...] spot’, as Freud could have called it⁶¹ – into which the ‘dream’ of the plot and author’s intent disappears without vanishing. And as if in a dream, we, and *the play*, find ourselves ‘mute’ and incapable of extricating ourselves from the obligation that the prince is passing onto us, as he himself was earlier incapable of resisting the Ghost’s beckoning. It seems pointless to argue that this is a figment of secularised imagination in order to insist that it promises purgatorial salvation, both for Hamlet and ourselves, if we somehow pay enough attention to certain fragments of its design.

Without wishing to belittle Greenblatt’s study which certainly succeeds in being highly fascinating and incisive in the context of its peculiar scope, it is necessary to admit that its conscious evasion of confrontation with *Hamlet*’s disturbing root recalls the classic paradox impugning the existence of Purgatory to which Greenblatt turns at the beginning of the book: if the Catholic church and the Pope have as great a ‘power to remit punishment due to sin’ (261) as they claim, why should there be a Purgatory? *Hamlet* has become by far the most popular play in the world in the last ‘four hundred years’, and if we are to follow Greenblatt’s closing metaphor that aligns theatre and literary criticism with the abolished intercessory rites to its logical conclusion, there

⁶¹ ‘There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled... This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown’ (*Interpretation*, 671).

should be little justification for the word 'Purgatory' in his title: the book should have been called *With Hamlet in Heaven*.

Instead, for Greenblatt *Hamlet* partly thrives on and partly accounts for the covert persistence of Purgatory, because it 'immeasurably intensifies a sense of the weirdness of the theater, its proximity to certain experiences that had been organized and exploited by religious institutions and rituals' (253). However, because the purgatorial aspect, even in Greenblatt's own opinion, accounts only for a *part* of this 'weirdness', the current title could still be adjusted into *Purgatory in Hamlet* to reflect this reversed balance between the two notions. Greenblatt leaves aside the problem of their association, identifying it with the seemingly suggestive but not interrogated authorial intent *despite* its avowed ambiguity, and chooses to seek comfort by translating it into the 'insubstantial pageant' of the secularised, symbolic, anodyne, and thus essentially *non-tragic* purgatory of *The Tempest*. For this reason, the question that Greenblatt asks here as part of this large assumption – whether Shakespeare 'was participating in a secularisation process, one in which the theater offers a disenchanted version of what the cult of Purgatory once offered', and which he answers with a non-committing 'perhaps' – is necessarily off the mark. The question that rather suggests itself here, in a Pirandellian fashion, is whether such appraisal of Shakespeare's authority in *Hamlet* is not in conflict with the dramatic reality of the text – which has itself been the subject of epochal debate that is far from over.

Thus the second question that suggests itself here is whether we should follow the author – Greenblatt's 'Shakespeare' – who, apparently, *wants* to keep Hamlet and all the subsequent generations of his audience in Purgatory, despite the discrepancies, or whether we should try, as it were, to reverse the decline of the diocese by attempting to

free the main characters and ourselves from this destiny. If we also acknowledge the distinction and, indeed, fierce opposition between the church and theatre on the one hand and Catholics and Protestants on the other in the 16th century England, neither conversion nor atheism is an option in the case of interpreting *Hamlet*'s mystery (that is, if we do acknowledge it as such). What Greenblatt calls 'secularization' corresponds, even in his own account, to the reverse process in which strife overwhelms the boundaries of the *saeculum*, the 'time', and, just like this play in general and the Ghost in particular, wrenches it out of scholastic joint, leaving neither Hamlet nor the audience any meaningful choice except to confront it.

Covering approximately the same ground almost forty years prior to Greenblatt, Eleanor Prosser's attempt in *Hamlet and Revenge* to engage as fully as possible with this very vision of the play's conflict received quite a dressing-down from Frank Kermode in *The New York Review of Books*. Modern treatments of *Hamlet* (including Greenblatt's) must still be mindful of his scathing and unflinching certainty:

The one obvious thing about *Hamlet* is that nobody could possibly say what it *means*; but people who think they have stumbled on something in it that everybody else has overlooked do not notice this. Although the graduate schools now go in for all manner of metacritical precautions, it is still a common enough ambition to find and follow the clue which will show that *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, that trinity of squares, have been wrong all the time. For instance, it can be argued that we shall be nearer a true understanding of *Hamlet* if we get close to what an Elizabethan audience might have thought it said, and the result of the research is almost certain to be a conviction that everybody since then, everywhere and practically always, has been getting it wrong; which is the conviction that prompted the inquiry in the first place.

(*'Reading Shakespeare's Mind'*, 15)

The fact that this view has not lost all its relevance in the later, theoretically informed age of *Hamlet* criticism, is supported, for example, by Terry Eagleton's evaluation of the play in his *William Shakespeare* (1986) which, in the chapter, correspondingly entitled

‘“Nothing”: *Othello, Hamlet, Coriolanus*’, states, in a similar tone, that

[Hamlet] will be scandalized that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, slow-witted lackeys of the state, should presume to penetrate his inward essence, pluck out the heart of his mystery. But the irony of this, as in *Othello*, is that there is no heart of the mystery to be plucked out. Hamlet has no ‘essence’ of being whatsoever, no inner sanctum to be safeguarded: he is pure deferral and diffusion, a hollow void which offers nothing determinate to be known. His ‘self’ consists simply in the range of gestures with which he resists available definitions, not in a radical alternative beyond their reach.

(*William Shakespeare* 72)

Contrary to the impression that it may have produced by now, the purpose of the current analysis is not specifically to counter Eagleton or Kermode by providing an equally unflinching defense of Prosser’s approach (which has, inclusive of Greenblatt, become a recognized example of excellence) especially by means of coming up with a new solution for *Hamlet*.

Instead, as it was stated in the beginning, the purpose is to insist on confronting the undisputed central problem of *Hamlet* (following the related example of *Oedipus* in the previous section), which both requires and defies our powers of observation, *as a problem*. The elusive shape of this contradiction has already been noted in the discussion of Greenblatt’s argument. By contrast, Kermode’s and Eagleton’s texts, which were meant to rely neither on historical *nor* on detailed textual analysis of the play, are instrumental in helping this shape appear without much of its usual armour – as it were, in the transparent form of the ‘trinity of squares’. And ‘the irony’ here certainly turns on Kermode and Eagleton, for, despite the rising influence of, for example, deconstruction, they managed to overlook the simple obverse of their categoric pronouncements: if *nobody*, neither Shakespeare nor Hamlet, knows what this play really ‘*means*’, how can one be sure that it does *not* mean anything? How can one *be* a hollow void and resist a

'radical alternative' *beyond* one's reach? Where does the certainty, the 'trinity of the squares', come from?

The presence of *something* underlying this certainty is indeed very palpable, as has already been noted in relation to Greenblatt's argument which acknowledges but consciously evades the problem of *Hamlet's* meaning. In a further ironic twist, an important point of thematic convergence between Prosser's and Greenblatt's arguments helps to discern the shifting outline of this object of resistance in the very structure of Kermode's Latin shield. The tripartite parallel construction (*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*), with *ubique* at its centre, recalls the moment of oath taking at the end of Act 1, a major point of attention for many (Ghost) studies of this play. It is the Ghost, the 'old mole' and 'worthy pioner' (1.5.162, 163), who thrice reveals itself to be '*hic et ubique*' underground and thus makes Hamlet, Horatio, and the soldiers thrice shift their ground for each repetition of the oath.

O day and night, but this is wondrous strange! (1.5.164)

says Horatio the 'scholar' immediately after the oath taking. When Hamlet, characteristically, does not oblige with anything more than a cryptic aphorism in response, the critics (and the audience more generally) take up the challenge to satisfy or dismiss the anxiety of this crucial moment at which the Ghost, literally, enters the stage, the plot, the mind of the protagonist, and thus the ear and ground of the *whole* Denmark. Hamlet's qualification of it as simply a 'stranger' (1.5.165) may be a sufficient warrant for a prince to give to the sentries on duty on behalf of his 'truepenny' confidante, but it does nothing to dissolve the suspicious impression of this shifting entry. None of them, including Hamlet, seems to realise *who* it is exactly that they have just let through into

the kingdom; and there is no hope of finding it out precisely because the Ghost secures Hamlet, literally, as its passport⁶². Because of its *appearance*, 'it' can count on virtually absolute power of influence over Hamlet and *thus* over anyone in the kingdom without having to reveal itself and prove its identity with/as the late king. Hamlet's later use of the 'father's signet' to get rid of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is an exact Lacanian parallel to this moment: the father's image and name are not the father, 'the king is not with the body'. Nevertheless, as this analysis will attempt to demonstrate, this does not mean that 'the king is a thing of nothing' either in Kermode's, Eagleton's or even Lacan's sense (that of the 'phallus', of course), because in dramatic terms, there definitely *is* a 'body' that is 'with the king'.

Greenblatt promotes the reading of '*hic et ubique*' in this scene as the 'Latin tag' that presumably refers to the prayer for the dead in the 'traditional Catholic ritual in England' for where 'God's mercy and forgiveness of sin are begged on behalf of all of those souls here and everywhere (*hic et ubique*) who rest in Christ' (235).⁶³ The relevance here is only superficial and is valuable again precisely by virtue of outlining that which it misses. That is, in the language of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, what this reading makes clear is the difference between 'one' and 'many': Hamlet may be punning on the Latin phrase from the Catholic service, but he is *not* referring to '*all* of those souls...who rest in Christ'; it is not a *different* soul that answers him every time he shifts

⁶² One of the extended uses of the word includes 'means or guarantee of salvation, as baptism, an indulgence, deathbed absolution, the administration of the last rites, etc. In some faith traditions, esp. *Orthodox Church*: (originally) a document proving this or (now more usually) containing prayers for the deceased, placed in the grave to guarantee safe passage to heaven. Esp. in phrase *passport to heaven*.' (OED).

⁶³ 'Deus, in cuius miseratione animae fidelium requiescunt; animabus famulorum famularumque tuarum omnium, *hic et ubique* in Christo quiescentium [...]' (*Hamlet in Purgatory*, Notes to Chapter Five, n.38, 301)

the ground; hence, as in the case of Oedipus' equation, there needs to be an extraordinary explanation for the equality between 'one' and 'many'.

Such an explanation is, indeed, unavoidably present in Greenblatt's argument on the immediately preceding page, marking the convergence with Prosser. As both these authors note, another important reference for '*hic et ubique*' in the context of the time was the debate about the divine ubiquity. Greenblatt produces a compromise between this and the purgatorial reading by designating the debate as a 'dispute over the Lutheran doctrine of *Christ's* ubiquity' (234, italics added). However, as Prosser emphasises in her treatment of this moment, such a compromise is not tenable in the context of the scene. First, ' "*hic et ubique*" cannot refer to an "honest ghost" ', because, according to the terms of the dispute, 'only God and the Devil can be both here and everywhere at the same time' (*Hamlet and Revenge*, 140). Greenblatt himself comes up very helpfully with quotes from Shakespeare to support this assertion:

The words [*hic et ubique*] refer to restless movement, a certain placelessness, comparable in *Othello* to Roderigo's description of Othello as "an extravagant and wheeling stranger/ Of here and everywhere" (1.1.137-38)...In *Twelfth Night*, a play of the same year [as *Hamlet*], Sebastian, baffled by the appearance of his double, declares that there cannot be "that deity in my nature/ Of here and everywhere" (5.1.220-21)...If this resonance is present in *Hamlet*, as it well may be, the prince's jest [while shifting the ground] is deepened by a disquieting association of his father's ghost with the omnipresence of God.

(*Hamlet in Purgatory*, 234)

The disquieting nature of this association is only emphasised by the fact that Greenblatt, virtually like Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus here, swears secrecy to Hamlet regarding the 'stranger' and obliges by producing 'further theological resonance to these words [*hic et ubique*], specifically relevant to Purgatory' (234). Not only does the 'stranger' not appear to be an ordinary 'ghost', but it also cannot appear to be Luther's ubiquitous

Christ to Hamlet (and the audience of either persuasion) for, at least, the obvious reason of demanding vengeance which should have belonged to Him in the first place.⁶⁴ These considerations leave Prosser and, as she claims with some force, the audience no choice but to align the apparition with the Devil. ‘Old mole’ and ‘worthy pioner’ are additional pieces of evidence in her argument as they refer to the contemporary popular belief that ‘demons...frequent[ed] mines’, indirectly supported again by a quote from *Twelfth Night* where ‘we find Toby Belch referring to the Devil as a “foul collier” (III. iv. 130)’. This is coupled with the fact that cellarage ‘beneath the stage’ ‘in Elizabethan drama’ was ‘the familiar abode...of demons, furies, and damned souls’ (140).

However, to be precise, Prosser never simply equates the Ghost with the Devil. Instead, she underscores the fact that ‘throughout the cellarage scene, the Ghost is acting *like a devil*’ (140, italics added). Similarity instead of identification may be just a formal distinction here based on the same appeal to the authority of Shakespeare’s design that we saw in Greenblatt. But the more intriguing development to it comes from Prosser’s own recourse to the Biblical tradition in the contemporary theatre. Unlike Greenblatt’s purgatorial gloss of *hic et ubique* which negates shifting by relating it to the multiplicity of the dead souls in the funeral prayer, Prosser comes up with a reference to Joseph Quincy Adams’ article ‘Some Notes on Hamlet’ which suggests ‘that a clue [to the *hic et*

⁶⁴ ‘To me [belongeth] vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in [due] time: for the day of their calamity [is] at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste’ (Deuteronomy 32:35). ‘Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but [rather] give place unto wrath [of God]: for it is written, Vengeance [is] mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.’ (Romans 12:19 1-5) Luther starts his *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans* unambiguously by saying that ‘this letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament’ (‘Vorrede auf die Epistel S. Paul: an die Romer’ in *D. Martin Luther: Die gantze Heilige Schrift Deudsch 1545 aufs new zurericht*, ed. Hans Volz and Heinz Blanke. Munich: Roger & Bernhard. 1972, vol. 2, pp. 2254-2268; trans. Bro. Andrew Thornton, OSB).

ubique] may be found in the Chester cycle *Processus Prophetarum*' (*Hamlet and Revenge*, note 39, 139):

Hamlet's attempt to make the friends swear, in which he shifts to four several places on the stage ... is apt to be taken as grotesque. Yet perhaps there was something conventional in this, as Professor Bradley suggests (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, p.412). I am reminded of the attempt of Balaam to curse the Children of Israel (*Numbers xxiii-xxiv*). Each time Balaam found himself unable to utter the curse, and each time Balaak suggested a removal of ground...This scene had already appeared on the stage of the mystery plays. (Adams 40)

Although both clues (mystery plays and traditional Catholic service) could be considered outdated by the time of *Hamlet*, the Biblical link in the mystery plays sheds at least some light on the possible meaning of the dramatic moment itself as well as on its larger significance. Certainly, Hamlet does not appear to be trying to disobey the Ghost; on the contrary, he is covering the ground with the oath endorsed by the spirit every single time. Superficially unlike Balaam's curse, this oath binds the witnesses to double secrecy: to keep secret Hamlet's secret *hic et ubique*. What is not particularly noted is that the Ghost *itself*, unlike the God in *Numbers*, takes part in the oath and thus binds *itself* to secrecy. A seeming, although quite spectacular, proof of this can be the closet scene where, apparently moved by pity towards Gertrude, the Ghost appears to Hamlet only. Together, these two facts produce a more important suggestion that the Ghost's participation in and endorsement of the oath means that the truth about his identity, provenance, and thus about Claudius' deed should remain a secret *even to the oath-takers*. The astonishing fact of the play is that, as was most recently emphasised by Steve Roth in his article 'Who Knows Who Knows Who's There? An Epistemology of *Hamlet* (Or, What Happens in the Mousetrap)',⁶⁵ the question of the king's murder is

⁶⁵ *Early Modern Literary Studies* 10-2 (September, 2004) 3.1-27

never brought to the surface; not only no one asks the question ‘*who* killed the old king?’, which is the case with Laius’ murder in Sophocles, but no one *publicly* associates the death of the previous king *with* murder (either during the Mousetrap scene or afterwards). This omission can hardly seem as incidental as it does in *Oedipus*: the whole play is shaped by the game of hide-and-seek that makes King Hamlet’s murder a common secret of Hamlet *and* Claudius. Thus the Ghost’s endorsement of Hamlet’s secrecy is, effectively, a secret endorsement of Claudius, and the main challenge of the play is therefore for Hamlet (and us) to recognise this most hidden aspect of the Ghost, its affinity not so much with the father as with the father’s muder(er).

The Latinised wisdom, and more specifically its Greek connection, is certainly obvious in this light: the ambiguous duty to the dead father, rendered both absolute and impenetrable precisely because of this specific relation, which will all but obliterate the son’s existence both in this and the next world – *semper, ubique, et ab omnibus* – aligns Hamlet not only with Oedipus but certainly also with Orestes. While at the level of plot *Hamlet* is certainly much closer to *Oresteia* (quite possibly influenced by its truncated two-play English version produced by the Admirals’ Men in 1599⁶⁶), the issue of knowledge and meaning of one’s actions aligns its no less significantly, if unwittingly and thus more fittingly, with *Oedipus*.

It is necessary to emphasise the problematic nature of this unwitting, structural correspondence, which neither presents itself as a given nor allows itself to be easily dismissed or translated into contiguous terms, especially in view of another strain within *Hamlet*’s scholarship stemming from Freud’s famous insight. In the straightforward

⁶⁶ as it is painstakingly argued by Louise Schleiner in her ‘Latinised Greek Drama in Shakespeare’s Writing of *Hamlet*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41, 1 (Spring, 1990), 29-48.

appropriation of that insight, 'Oedipus' (conceived as the familiar structure of the complex) tends to take the place of the author, Devil, God, or the lost purgatorial soul.

Recent psychoanalytically informed studies of *Hamlet* have been more attentive to the problematic nature of this link and have tried to accommodate it to what is considered to be one of the fundamental discoveries of psychoanalysis. Already discussed in the Introduction *After Oedipus* by Lupton and Reinhard approaches the relationship between *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* from the 'retroactive' point of view:

If *Hamlet* is the "translation" of *Oedipus*, it is also a *translation* in the sense of metaphor. That is, *Hamlet*, in its very figurative distortion, points back to a structure only retroactively "prior," rather than being the secondary text that merely confirms the authoritative meaning of its archetype...Hamlet's scenes of imperfect mourning, which prevent Aristotelian closure and preclude reductive Oedipal readings, are precisely what render it a "problem play" demanding interpretation: *Hamlet's* excessive mourning both resists and enables the Oedipal reading as such.

(14-15)

A much more recent and, characteristically, more ambitious (and categorical) restatement of this argument can be found in Žižek's 'Death's Merciless Love' (published by *lacan.com* in 2004), which relies on 'Hamlet's Mill...the notorious New Age classic of Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend' and, of course, Lacan and Hegel to declare that

One thing is nonetheless clear here: temporally and logically, the Hamlet narrative IS earlier than the Oedipal myth. We are dealing here with the mechanism of the unconscious displacement well known to Freud: something that is logically earlier is perceptible ... only as a later secondary distortion of some allegedly "original" narrative...So, in the case of Oedipus and Hamlet, instead of the linear/historicist reading of Hamlet as a secondary distortion of the Oedipal text, the Oedipus myth is (as Hegel already claimed) the grounding myth of the Western Greek civilization (the suicidal jump of the Sphynx representing the disintegration of the old pre-Greek universe); and it is in Hamlet's "distortion" of the Oedipus that its repressed content articulates itself - the proof of it being the fact that the Hamlet matrix is found

everywhere in pre-Classic mythology, up to the [sic] Ancient Egypt itself whose spiritual defeat is signalled by the suicidal jump of the Sphynx.⁶⁷

These appropriations of *Hamlet's* (and *Oedipus* 's) *hic et ubique* character seem to appreciate and benefit from the complexity of the plays at the level of theory which they claim to render less 'linear' or 'naïve'. On the other, the very appropriation of the problematic relationship between the two plays as a given proof for the phenomenon of 'retroactive distortion' serves to perpetuate the paradox of the 'trinity of squares' – or that which Vernant terms 'vicious circle' (discussed above in the Introduction).

This impasse is quite real for the studies in question which, like Lupton and Reinhard's *After Oedipus* and Garber's *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, choose to level the traditional divide between literary text and theory in favour of paying at least just as much, if not more, attention to theories of *Hamlet* and *Oedipus* as they do to what they call theory in *Hamlet* and *Oedipus* themselves. Similarly to *Hamlet's* role as an ambiguously 'veiled' purgatorial spirit lost after/in the tumult of Reformation, these studies transform *Hamlet* and *Oedipus* into 'veiled' figures of Freud's (self-)analysis. The following passage, introducing the chapter on 'Shapes of Grief' in '*Hamlet, Freud, and Mourning*', is (meant to be) representative of the strategy in question:

In this chapter we map *Hamlet's* "forms, moods, shapes of grief" as they conjoin Shakespeare, mourning, and autobiography in Freud's letters to Fliess, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "Mourning and Melancholia," and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In these texts, the processes of "projection" and "introjection" – aligned by Lacan with the dialectic of the imaginary and symbolic orders – simultaneously articulate and interfold inside and outside, subject and object, and presence and absence in the faulty act of accommodating loss. In Freud's writing, *Hamlet* marks the convergence of mourning, allegory, and the Oedipus complex; as both histrionic avenger and melancholy introvert, *Hamlet* defines the subject as mourner for literature and psychoanalysis.

(*After Oedipus* 12)

⁶⁷ <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-love.htm>

While this certainly reflects (albeit very selectively) the peculiarity of critical tradition in the field, the perspective of *After Oedipus* becomes inevitably reductive, even while it attempts to critique this very tendency, in both theory and drama. The opening paragraph of this introduction (which immediately precedes the above-quoted passage) can be read as an acknowledgement of this situation:

Consistently paired in Freud's early writing, together Oedipus and *Hamlet* have come to stand for the vicissitudes of the Oedipal in psychoanalytic literary criticism, whether as a master key to meaning, a reductive allegoresis, or a weathered milestone on the royal roads to post-Freudian truth. (11)

However, what may look like an acknowledgement here should later be construed as simply a statement of interest: the two token plays in question are, in fact, considered mostly *as* tokens of theory where meaning as such is always already retroactive; Hamlet is an Oedipal 'histrionic avenger and melancholy introvert' and Oedipus is a vehicle for displaying Hamlet's chief repressed fantasy – whereas the Ghost is a 'a memory trace' of both, 'the sign of something missing, something omitted, something undone' (Garber 129), projection of an introjection and introjection of a projection (Lupton and Reinhard 25). While the analytical elaborations of psychoanalysis regarding the principles of mental functioning in general and the conflicts in these two particular plays have proved most influential for the appreciation of the *real* ambiguity in both, it is necessary to resist the temptation to reduce the ambiguity in the plays to the structural principle and message itself, to inject the unconscious with linguistic or historicist structure and vice versa, to equate ambiguity with knowledge, diagnosis with cure, drama with therapy, stage and the world – precisely because such an equation is possible only because of the intrinsic difference between them. As tempting as these 'uncanny' correspondences and

inter-penetrations may be according to Garber's argument, it is necessary to remain attentive to Freud's own caveat regarding this relationship:

The distinction between what has been repressed and what has been surmounted cannot be transposed onto the uncanny in fiction without profound modification; for the realm of phantasy depends for its very existence on the fact that *its content is not submitted to the reality-testing faculty*.

(*'The Uncanny'*, 372-3, italics added)

Garber uses this passage to relate the *Murder of Gonzago*, 'the story of Old Hamlet's death', and 'Ophelia's disturbingly knowledgeable ballads' (128), which she conceives as 'encapsulated artifacts', to the notion of 'phantasy' in the context of Freud's abandonment of seduction theory. This is supposed to underscore their revelatory uncanny character. However, the matter of the dramatic facts is that, if we stick to Freud's understanding of the phenomenon, there can be no such revelatory encapsulation here precisely because of the lack of reality-testing in fiction. According to Schelling, whom Freud respectfully quotes on the notion, '*Unheimlich*' is the name for everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light' (345). The status of the above mentioned episodes – as virtually every other episode in *Hamlet* – is precisely the reverse: they do come to light but their 'secret' remains 'hidden' within the confines of the 'fiction'. And if fiction is then appropriated as a principle of analysis and reality-testing itself, the meaning of the 'uncanny' as a term loses all significance. This would certainly be very congruent with Lacan's vision of the conflict in *Hamlet* – the central source of references for Lupton and Reinhard, Garber, and Žižek – which it identifies with and schematizes as

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. (*'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet'*, 12)

Revelation of this message here becomes a function of a transcendent order of the Other, which, according to Lacan, normally remains hidden (14). But how and why do we become aware of the two sides of the signifier in this case? We should not, unless, as Lacan puts it at the start of his exposition, he ‘open[s]’ our ‘eyes’ to this structural problem in the play (25). He seems to break the vicious circle by insisting here that the straightforward notion of ‘interhuman relationships’ cannot help us to elucidate the ‘tragedy of [human] desire as it appears in *Hamlet*’ because of the subject’s ‘certain position of dependence upon the signifier’, and it is only by reference to a certain ‘topological system’ representing this phenomenon that the tragedy could be appreciated (11).

However, to put it in Lacan’s style, such an appreciation of the play would not be critical but purely *diacritical* – that is, replacing the chief protagonists with algebraic symbols and reducing their roles to a limited number of arrows, locked into a complex labyrinth of his famous diagram-triptych of desire⁶⁸. Just as Greenblatt’s use of Bosch (and a number of other Purgatory-related artworks), this move only serves to create the impression that the play itself provides neither a demand nor a structure for liberation, salvation, explication, but only for *repetition*. Appropriating such a concept as structure for theory certainly increases the chances to appreciate the complexity of the play, but it does so also *at the expense* of the play’s own complexity by suggesting that by some form of structural appropriation of the play’s incomprehensibility it can somehow be comprehended. As in the case of Purgatory, this cannot happen unless the whole structure of explanation is dissolved with the object of analysis.

⁶⁸ ‘The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious’, *Ecrits: a selection*, 323-361, reproduced in ‘Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*’ on page 14.

To address this impasse that stems not so much from the psychoanalytic approaches to the plays but from the nature of the dramatic conflict in them, the present analysis will follow a psychoanalytic line of inquiry precisely because of its potential to confront and overcome resistance without appropriative reduction. This is what the present analysis understands to be the chief motive of Freud's method. For while *Hamlet* can be qualified by Terry Eagleton as 'pure deferral and diffusion' only with a *limited* measure of fairness, Freud's task organises itself (at least, in part) precisely around undoing the reductionism of *purity* in resistance, isolating its fantasmatic and transferential core, and translating it enough to restore the psychic balance of the individual. Analysis in this case equals neither total unraveling nor repression of the symptom altogether. On the contrary, it addresses the undisputed need to make sense of the destruction that we witness in the play. Those who have accused psychoanalysis (and psychoanalytic literary criticism) of reductionism could certainly have legitimate and compelling reasons⁶⁹ as it is next to impossible for any critic to preserve the fine balance of appreciation where, as in the psychoanalytic cure, the nature and extent of analysis should respect the individuality of all the involved parties (namely, those of critic vs. text).

In the case of a psychoanalytic literary critic (informed by the specific opposition of the ego vs. unconscious in all its permutations), it is especially difficult since the text, as Avi Erlich notes in the introduction to his own problematic psycho-analysis of *Hamlet*, is not an actual analysand, capable of taking initiative in their own defense. This is precisely why it can be, paradoxically, all the more advisable to combine the so-called

⁶⁹ For example, the fairly recent and extensive *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis* by Richard Webster (1996), and the earlier and engaging, *Out of My System: psychoanalysis, ideology, and critical method* by Frederick Crews (1975).

traditional psychoanalysis and traditional literary criticism *under a challenge* of never forgetting about the old-fashioned divide between them. For, as *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* abundantly demonstrate in their respective plots, it is incredibly easy to make the mistake of identifying a human being – especially, a *fictional* one – with a piece of text, an *object*, manipulable and ominous, while, in the inevitable chiasmus, reducing (literary) text to an idiosyncrasy of a symptom with no sovereignty rights.⁷⁰ With this in mind, the ensuing analysis of *Hamlet*, instead of eliminating or rendering absolute the human factor of tragedy, will strive to adopt what can be termed the principle of ‘bounty’, or non-equivalence, advocated by Hamlet himself with the above-mentioned self-irony: ‘use every man/after his desert, and who should ’scape whipping?’⁷¹ That is, unlike Hamlet, and following Freud’s suggestive reading of this very line in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, the characters and the text of the play will be afforded as much ‘evenly suspended’ attention as possible, which will submit the engagement with the mass of criticism and theory to the primary focus on the text of the play⁷². This balancing in the focus will help to ensure the recognition not only of the ideational limits of the texts under consideration but also of the temporal limits of the current analysis itself. Hence, of necessity, it will constitute a compromise, but, unlike Lupton and Reinhard’s and, similarly, Garber’s approach to the intertextuality between Shakespeare, theory, and other literary examples, it will insist on avoiding excessive counter-

⁷⁰ As is decried by Timothy Dean in his recent article ‘Art as Symptom: Zizek and the Ethics of Psychoanalytic Criticism’ (2002).

⁷¹ Demonstrated also by *Oedipus* in his own respect with no less amplitude.

⁷² Chiefly on the basis of *The Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford Edition* (1997) which strives to reproduce the text of the play as fully and continuously as possible while also reflecting, through the use of indentation and overlapping numbering, the complex and contradictory state of the text. To evaluate the editorial judgment in the cases of dispute which are directly relevant to the present analysis the 1994 *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* edition of *Hamlet*, and several others, will be consulted.

transference, that is, on keeping an eye on the specific contours of the case in hand, however ghostly they may seem. For if we grant (particularly Freud in his *Papers on Technique*) that it is medically unethical, counterproductive, and unhealthy to let the melancholic lead the analyst with no restriction, this is particularly pertinent to the approach to *Hamlet*, which should be at once more reverent and more penetrating, if we genuinely want to acknowledge the full extent of its 'uncanny' power.

3.2 Stay, Illusion.

They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence it is that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

All's Well That Ends Well, II.iii.1-6

The above passage from *All's Well* was already used by Prosser as an effective epigraph to the section on *Hamlet* in *Hamlet and Revenge* (95). In view of the direction of the present discussion this passage is again highly appropriate. Unlike Prosser's, the current analysis will concentrate on the peculiarity of *Hamlet* which starts, apparently, by leaving its characters only the possibility of 'seeming knowledge', without the option of 'should'⁷³. The latter rings of didactic nostalgia and does offset well the bitter and ostentatious mournfulness of Hamlet's first appearance in Act 1 scene 2. But it is necessary to remember, especially in the context of the emphasis on various forms of self-conscious ostentation (dramatic and intertextual) that characterise this play according to modern critics, that its very first scene, while no less ostentatious in its subject matter, is completely independent both from the main narrative sources and from the main characters. It is not up to them, let alone the secondary characters present in the scene, to initiate the ostending. Given the play's notoriously complex textual condition, it is not completely up to the author either. The shape of *Hamlet* has been constantly fluctuating from edition to edition, production to production, analysis to analysis, altering the proportion of the characters' dramatic presence – and such modern studies of this text as Lacan's, Erlich's, Adelman's, Garber's, Lupton and Reinhard's, and

⁷³ Prosser's treatment of *Hamlet* still sees these options as more or less balanced.

Greenblatt's have done a lot to emphasise the ghostliness of this shape, in various senses of this term.

In the context of this double emphasis on ghostliness and ostentation, it is difficult to overlook the reverse of this proposition which reflects the peculiarity of the dramatic situation – that is, the unique position of authority enjoyed by the Ghost from the first scene. This has nothing to do specifically with the well-known speculation that Shakespeare himself doubled as the Ghost and the player-king⁷⁴, although such a linking increases the metatheatrical accent of these crucial segments of the plot. Neither does it inhere in the specific kind of intertextuality described by the above mentioned critics where *Hamlet* is presented through the dense network of its theoretically and culturally mediated appropriations. Rather, it is to emphasise the fact that *Hamlet* as such is a thoroughly metatheatrical (and intertextual) play, for it is the Ghost, which in this plot is the extraneous element par excellence, that from the first scene enigmatically draws the characters and, consequently, the whole action off their reasonably self-contained course into an unsettling version of the Hamlet narrative. Such a doubling of the plot, involving the characteristic splitting and alteration of the atom of the original narrative, has already been observed in Sophocles' *Oedipus*: both plays set the action in the dramatic situation which substantially separates the protagonists from the founding event and the straightforward trajectory toward the denouement of their respective dramas. In this respect, Lacan's explicit differentiation between Oedipus and Hamlet as the one who does not know and the one who knows⁷⁵, respectively, is misleading: neither character

⁷⁴ Succinctly analysed by John Quincy Adams, Jr., in 'Some Notes on *Hamlet*' (*Modern Language Notes*, Vol.28, No.2, Feb. 1913, pp. 39-43).

⁷⁵ 'as I have said, the thing that distinguishes Hamlet from Oedipus is that Hamlet *knows*' ('Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', p.19).

has full awareness or control of his plot; instead, they are faced with the situation in which they are *forced to discover* it, with only a partial success. Unlike Hamlet, Oedipus may be physically implicated in the founding crimes (his exposure and the ensuing parrincest); he may be the more focused protagonist who does not wait for information but sends for it to Apollo and then plays the quick and persistent interrogator. But until he is finished with the very last witness, the relationship between him and the founding crimes in his plot is in question. And even after he identifies himself with the outcast-perpetrator of the oracles (and thus the source narrative), he goes on to appropriate authority by his self-blinding, which literally erases the distinction between him as an unwitting, blind victim-perpetrator and the *daimon* that brought the crimes to pass. If there should be a distinction made between Oedipus and Hamlet with regard to knowledge, then it is Oedipus who at the start of the plot has, at least, *heard* about the crime from the oracle and whose whole trajectory is motivated by his 'seeming knowledge' of that pronouncement.

Hamlet, on the contrary, does not even start, with regard to the main sources, until the end of the first Act, when the main character finally receives knowledge of the founding crime that is comparable to that of Amleth in Saxo's tale (and, subsequently, Belleforest's)⁷⁶. Until he first hears about the Ghost, Shakespeare's Hamlet does not give any sign of even clearly suspecting anything or anyone. Instead, he is steeped in melancholy and repulsed by his mother's hasty remarriage to the point of finding it physically nauseating to live on:

⁷⁶ The *Variorum Hamlet* quotes Seymour as saying: 'This whole scene appears unnecessary to the design and conduct of the play, and might with advantage be omitted. The hand of Sh. is visible in it occasionally, but it is part of that undigested plan which is manifest throughout the play. [Seymour finds the same fault in *Macbeth* and *Lear* Ed.]' (1).

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
(1.2.129-34)

It is hardly possible to imagine him devising a revenge strategy against his uncle at this moment – and thus approximating the role of the protagonist in the source narrative – without an informing and catalysing mediator.⁷⁷

The first scene, which precedes this moment, certainly introduces such a potential mediator, but its figure makes the task of mediation uniquely daunting. Compared with Sophocles, the mediation of the plot in *Hamlet* is more 'accidental', to use the term from Horatio's final speech, because in the former case all the information and major events are centred on Oedipus from the very start – while in the latter the Ghost first appears in front of two, all but incidental soldiers, wearied by the nightly watch in preparation for the war. Their randomness as witnesses would be complete and anonymous if it were not for their apparent acquaintance with Horatio (which itself is not explained). Even with this link in mind, the coincidence through which the reality at Shakespeare's Elsinore is drawn into the orbit of the Hamlet narrative seems extraordinary: not only does the informing mediator introduce himself to almost completely incidental figures but his *very nature* puts him, and his message, at the greatest possible disadvantage. He is certainly not the simple, non-descript stranger, looking for a reward for his service as it is in the case with the Corinthian in Sophocles'

⁷⁷ In the comparable circumstances, that is at the news of his wayward daughter's prodigality, Shylock utters 'The curse never fell upon our nation till now! I never felt it till now!' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.39-40). However, his state of deep oppression and melancholy does not prevent him from seizing the occasion to turn the bond he made with Antonio into a revenge opportunity.

Oedipus. Neither is he comparable to Teiresias, who, for all his extraordinary status, is accepted and revered as a prophet. In *Hamlet*, the mediator is of the most 'questionable shape', whose very existence and motives, even if his message can be found truthful (as Prosser notably emphasised), should constantly be in question from the start. Thus the precipitation of the particular turn in the plot that it comes to effect is, as a result, bound to be 'wondrous strange', alien to the other characters, the protagonist, and literally the plot itself compared to the source narrative. Barnardo's famous opening 'Who's there?' epitomises this situation of the two alienated segments of dramatic reality coming, uncertainly, to face each other.

Yet, paradoxically, it is the very nature of the Ghost's alienness that provides the ultimate object of attraction for the characters involved. A comparison between Sophocles and Shakespeare is again illuminating here: the Corinthian messenger has no difficulty in penetrating the plot because he has absolutely no prior existence for anyone in Thebes except the old shepherd; his connections with the latter are as straightforward as his reasons for coming to Thebes, which he announces immediately upon arrival. Teiresias, Creon, Jocasta, and the old shepherd in their respective roles of the plot mediators are less neutral and thus less credible for Oedipus precisely because of their prior relationship with him; however, there is nothing *in* any of them, as opposed to *what* they (unwittingly) come to say, to arrest Oedipus' attention and unsettle him.⁷⁸

By contrast, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is an instantly and radically unsettling figure⁷⁹.

In its very first scene – which is crucial for its role as the mediator – it *appears twice* but

⁷⁸ This is held against Oedipus by Ahl in his *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction* which emphasises Oedipus' lack of attention not only to the glaring inconsistencies in his witnesses' reports but also to the individual psychology of each witness.

⁷⁹ Self-blinded Oedipus is also radically unsettling, but he has nothing to mediate when he appears at the very end. Likewise, in terms of the visual register, he and the Ghost of King Hamlet are vastly different, although both leave a deeply foreboding impression.

says nothing. This, however, does not in the least prevent it from starting to fulfil the role because its very appearance, as the ‘person’ of the late king, prompts itself into an enigmatic message. As soon as Horatio confronts the Ghost the first time, failing to elicit a response, he concludes: ‘This bodes some strange eruption to our state’ (1.1.69). At the end of the scene, after having confronted the Ghost twice with the same result, Horatio claims ‘upon my life, /This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him’, that is ‘young Hamlet’ (1.1.170-71) – who, before he even sees the Ghost, himself proclaims with characteristic exaltation:

My father’s spirit – in arms! All is not well,
I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!
Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes.
(1.2.254-57).

What makes Horatio and Hamlet say what they say at these respective moments? It may be, following the arguments of modern critics (such as Greenblatt), a dramatised cultural reflex. Indeed, the scenes where the characters encounter and discuss the Ghost are self-consciously filled with references and behaviour based on the traditionally religious and, what Greenblatt and Freud long before him would call, aesthetically secularised pneumatology, as well as politics and history relevant to the moment at hand (Horatio’s excursus into the old Hamlet versus old Fortinbras case, his Roman interpretation of the haunting as an ‘omen’ of ‘eruption’ to ‘our state’, his and Marcellus’ uneasy recollection of the Christian spirit lore). However, the Ghost and all the complex details of its visitations exceed all this ‘seeming knowledge’, which creates a mismatch between the reflex and stimulus. In fact, Lafeu’s opposition between the ‘seeming knowledge’ and the ‘unknown terror’, quoted in the epigraph, is not so much cancelled by *Hamlet* in the

sense that it simply confronts the characters with the Ghost, thereby leaving them no option of foregoing their ordinary knowledge in order to gain access to the occult and primal one (as it happens with Doctor Faustus, for example). On the contrary, *Hamlet* undermines this opposition in the sense that it is this very 'seeming knowledge' about the impossible that *primes the subject for the terrifying encounter* with 'it'. To be absolutely precise, there should be nothing particularly terrifying or foreboding in the figure of the armed king itself, appearing on the battlements of his castle. It is the knowledge of the witnesses that the king has been dead for months and the conviction that, while the dead are not supposed to return, when they do it always means something terrible that immediately define the figure as a revenant and, therefore, a 'dreaded sight' (1.1.25). Thus, the first necessity for the success of the 'accidental' mediation of the plot by the Ghost resides in the knowledge and convictions of the witnesses. This is the point of a deep affinity with Oedipus who has, essentially, no one to blame for his discovery except his own mind (and the *daimon* which, conceptually, is never thoroughly distinct from it). Ultimately, with his urge to discover, he is himself the principal plot-mediator and, in a sense, his own revenant (this is certainly not to diminish the degree of otherness manifested in the extraordinary events of Oedipus' discovery). In *Hamlet's* case, the watchers in the first scene, similarly, have the urge to discover, are terrified of the consequences, and, most importantly, decide to impart their discovery exclusively to the young Hamlet. All these links, unlike Oedipus' case, are much less straightforward and must be further looked into.

To start with the link between terror and revenants: Viola and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, in comparable circumstances, do not become as terrified and suspicious as those who encounter the long lost king and father in *Hamlet*. The immediate

difference here is that both twins have no difficulty in confirming to each other that they are, in fact, still living – while Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo attended the king's funeral and, in the first scene, confirm with considerable certainty that their visitor is 'as the air, invulnerable', can be virtually ubiquitous (' 'Tis here! 'Tis here! 'Tis gone!', (1.1.45, 42-44)), and therefore cannot be their former, human king. The language of the scene that designates the Ghost with consistent indefiniteness as 'it', 'thing', 'sight' is thus thoroughly precise: their king, just as Viola and Sebastian – although for the opposite reason – has not really returned from the dead. The figure that they see only *looks like* the former 'majesty of Denmark' and therefore is, as far as they are concerned, what Horatio calls it – an 'illusion' (1.1.127). This returns us to our main question: if all the characters involved in the encounter with the Ghost in the first scene, and Hamlet later in Act 1 scene 5, are convinced that this 'thing' cannot literally be the impossible – that is, their king and father returned from the dead – why are they terrified? What prompts them to translate its presence into the message about 'eruption', which leads them to the young Hamlet and 'foul play'? After all, the audience of Marlowe's *Faustus* that witnesses the illusion representing 'Alexander and his paramour' and the audience of Prospero's 'insubstantial pageant' are not terrified but rather amused by the spectacle.

There is certainly a fundamental difference between the 'illusion' in *Hamlet* and the illusions in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest* which can be well appreciated in the context of another famous epigraph of one of the already mentioned modern studies of *Hamlet*. Marjorie Garber prefaces her analysis of the play with the following quote from *The Magic Mountain*:

But the calling back of the dead, or the desirability of calling them back, was a ticklish matter, after all. At bottom, and boldly confessed, the desire does not

exist; it is misapprehension precisely as impossible as the thing itself, as we should soon see if nature once let it happen. What we call mourning for our dead is perhaps not so much grief at not being able to call them back as it is grief at not being able to want to do so. (*Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, 124)

The apparitions in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest* have nothing to do with mourning and the desire of actually calling back the dead; they are also completely contained by the power of the performing magician. Because of these two aspects, they are indeed pure illusions, without any substance of their own. The complexities of the situation in *Twelfth Night* are indeed related to mourning and the more general fact that every character's desire there is strongly motivated by the object that promises the least probable opportunity for satisfaction. The very devotion of their desire to this object (either lost or straightforwardly unattainable) makes its obtainment all but impossible if it were not for 'fate' (and, indeed, absolutely impossible in Malvolio's case).

The situation in *Hamlet* is uniquely different. On the one hand, the appearance of the Ghost is not a pure accident of 'fate' in the way that the shipwreck at the coast of Illyria is in *Twelfth Night*. On the other, it is not the result of conjuration or magic performed by the living; their desire, or lack thereof, is in this case *absolutely* irrelevant. It is true that the father's image presents itself to Hamlet's 'mind's eye' at the felicitous moment when Hamlet, expressing to Horatio his dismay at his mother's remarriage with his uncle, says that he would he had 'met his dearest foe in heaven' before he had ever 'seen that day' (1.2.182-3). However, Hamlet's desire here, expressed at more length in his preceding first soliloquy, quoted above, is not to see his father again, or his spirit, but to join him in the other world – that is, to die. More importantly, the Ghost has *already appeared* to Horatio, and before that, to Marcellus and Barnardo, neither of whom, as far as we know, have had any desires even remotely approaching otherworldly matters. This

is the first hint at the fact that the dead in *Hamlet* not only appear in spite of the desire of the living but by the very circumstances of their appearance seem to interpret that desire in a peculiarly ironic fashion.⁸⁰ Here the difference from visitations in other Shakespeare's tragedies is suggestive: Brutus, Macbeth, and Richard all have straightforward psychological reasons to have their otherworldly visitors. It is quite remarkable, in this context, that the young Hamlet, who is the only one of the witnesses with a psychological link to the late king, *does not* have the Ghost come directly to him; it is he that has to go and, as it were, visit the Ghost first. This underscores not only the dramatic independence of the Ghost but the necessity to explore further the matter of his attraction.

The exploration certainly leads to more questions and comparisons. *Julius Caesar* features the account of 'prodigies', witnessed by Casca in 2.3, which is explicitly referred to by Horatio in his interpretation of the Ghost in the first scene ('In the most high and palmy state of Rome,/ A little ere the mightiest Julius fell', etc. (1.1.79-80). However, the two cases cannot be more different with regard to the nature of the observed phenomena. Although there is similarity in the secondary nature of the witnesses, it is specifically clear that the prodigies in *Julius Caesar* have neither shown themselves exclusively to Casca nor have been confined to one exclusive shape nor have exclusively consisted of revenants – they are bewilderingly varied and witnessed by everyone, which suits well the purpose of signifying to the city the civil chaos that will

⁸⁰ This Žižek characteristically describes in a number of his works as 'the answer of the Real' – an extraordinary coincidence – which, to the subject, appears to make sense in spite of its very randomness. This goes back certainly to Lacan's discussion of the Ghost as the signifier veiling the 'hole in the real' and, in the same context, of the 'uncanny' which he defines as an instance of the decomposing fantasy engulfing the 'image of the other subject' ('Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', 37-38; 22) – and further back to Freud's original discussion of the uncanny as the bizarre, but often strangely meaningful, surfacing of the primitive (animistic and anthropocentric), long-repressed beliefs.

ensue after Caesar's assassination. By contrast, the exclusivity of the Ghost's presentation to Marcellus, Barnardo, Horatio, and *then* Hamlet, contradicts the meaning that Horatio ascribes to the apparition. This exclusivity is poignant not only in its first interview with Hamlet but also, if not more so, in the closet scene with Gertrude. If it bodes some eruption to the state of Denmark, why does it not show itself more openly? If it means to care for Gertrude's soul and reputation, as J.D. Wilson insisted it does, why does it not make itself visible to her? Finally, again, what exactly makes the visitation terrifying when neither the witnesses nor the revenant should have any reason for inducing and experiencing terror, respectively? In other words, what is it that ensures the success of the Ghost's plot-mediating mission?

This complex of details and questions leaves us with the sense of inexplicability of the Ghost's visitation from the point of view of straightforward motivation and the palpable presence of some other, non-straightforward, intention. The 'illusion' in *Hamlet*, unlike either the insubstantial illusions of Faustus and Prospero or the spirits of the murdered victims in other tragedies of Shakespeare, has a substance, agenda, and message of its own. As Polonius says about young Hamlet's strange behaviour, 'Though this be madness, yet there is method/in 't' (2.2.203-04). The comparison between the first scene's visitation and this latter moment, where Polonius is trying to sound Hamlet out, suggests itself because here it is young Hamlet himself who appears as a revenant in Ophelia's closet, after she 'denied his access' to her, following Polonius' 'command' (2.1.105-107):

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced;
No hat upon his head; his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ankle;

Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other;
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, -- he comes before me.
(2.1.74-81)

Just as the soldiers on the battlements, Ophelia is very much 'affrighted' by this sight. However, her reaction is easier to explain. The revenant aspect of the visitation is due to the profound alteration in the visitor's decorum and, as David Hillman would emphasise, 'discretion'⁸¹: it is both the place and, especially, the manner of Hamlet's dress that are startlingly inappropriate. Everything about his appearance and behaviour in Ophelia's closet seems to cry 'madness', as Polonius duly concludes. Before his first interview with the prince after the closet incident, Polonius, not unlike Freud, presents to Claudius and Gertrude a plausible deterministic aetiology of this madness:

And he, repulsed--a short tale to make--
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we mourn for.
(2.2.146-151)

However, after their first interview -- and especially after their 'lawful' spying on Hamlet in the nunnery scene -- it becomes clear both for Polonius and Claudius that although his unsettled melancholic mood can be reasonably traced to the known recent events, it certainly has some hidden 'method' in it:

There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger [...]

⁸¹ 'Puttenham, Shakespeare, and the Abuse of Rhetoric', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol.36, No.1, The English Renaissance, (Winter, 1996).

(3.2.163-166)

Polonius' initial unwitting linking of Hamlet's sudden descent into madness and mourning is certainly very apposite. The abrupt change in Hamlet's person, and namely his extraordinary visitation of Ophelia's closet, occurs precisely after he encounters the Ghost at the end of the first act. The exact motivation, as in the case of the Ghost, is not easy to fathom, especially with regard to the facilitation of Hamlet's role as the avenger (if anything, this incident *draws* attention to his motives not helps to cover them). The pattern of the visitation itself is strikingly similar in its enigmatic character to all the appearances of the Ghost:

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 he would draw it. Long stay'd 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 turn'd,
He seem'd 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.
(2.1.84-97)

This description certainly has important parallels to the other closet visitation performed by the Ghost in the third Act: the piteousness, the respective states of undress⁸², and the poignant focus on the woman. Regarding the latter, however, there is certainly an already noted distinction between the visitations in that Ophelia can, at least, see Hamlet

⁸² In Q1, the Ghost appears in Gertrude's closet in his 'nightgown'; Q2 and F1 'leave open the possibility that the Ghost is appearing again in his armor' (*The Norton Shakespeare, Hamlet* 3.4.94, footnote 6, 1722).

whose behaviour indeed leaves a profound mark on her mind. Thus the important facts of the matter here are that in the two closet scenes in the play it is the *young* Hamlet who plays the ghost for the onstage female audience: the first time a mute, the second time a speaking one (thereby reproducing the pattern of the main Ghost's visitations). This helps focus the observation of the obvious parallels on the crucial aspect of the relationship between the roles of the young Hamlet and the Ghost. After the one goes to meet the other in the first Act, he takes over the Ghost's role of the plot-mediator – not only in its function but also in its very problematic, ghostly aspect. The enigmatic peculiarity of this transmission is that it does not happen momentarily and constitutes neither a straightforward transmission between nor a straightforward replacement of the characters in question. Nor does this transmission go one way from the Ghost to young Hamlet. The second closet scene with Gertrude presents an extraordinary manifestation of doubling and superimposition of the mediators and scenes where Hamlet, virtually, plays the role of the speaking Ghost, which he witnessed in Act 1 scene 5, to his mother, while the Ghost appears exclusively to him, allegedly, to reinforce his original mediating message from the same scene ('Do not forget: this visitation/Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.', 3.4.110-11). Furthermore, if we pay attention to the stage directions in Q1, there is a remarkably reciprocal change in the Ghost since its last encounter with Hamlet: it is its turn to appear undressed down to its 'night-gown,' while it is Hamlet now who is armed and speaking 'daggers' to the queen; another remarkable change in comparison with the first Act is that this time the Ghost comes directly to Hamlet, just as Hamlet came to 'it' (and later to Ophelia).

All these further complications of the dramatic structure of the play only strengthen our initial proposition of a strong but alien relation between the play and its

plot and returns us to the matter of the Ghost's enigmatic presence which introduces this relation through its entry in Act 1 scene 1 and certainly through its interview with young Hamlet in scene 5 of the same Act. This relation, although consistent throughout the scenes, is at best only partially intelligible to the participants themselves, as our latest comparisons show. It has indeed that peculiar status of the madness with 'a method in't', or as Eliot famously noted apropos Hamlet's antic disposition, it is 'less than madness and more than feigned' ('Hamlet and His Problem', 146). Despite, and indeed because of, the doubling of the mediation, the founding event of the plot, the 'matter' of the play, manages to stay shadowed – *regardless* of the fact that in the second closet scene its main communicator is not a ghost. At the dramatic level of the scene, this shadowing of communication is certainly caused by the exclusive and thus problematic presence of the Ghost, which casts a dramatic shadow over Hamlet's behaviour and thus on the outcome of the scene. However, this very circumstance objectively points out the depth of the mystery concerning the founding matter of the plot: if the answer to Hamlet's intermediary state between madness and feigning is the Ghost's presence, either relatively real (as in the scene with Gertrude) or immediately recalled (as in the case of his visiting Ophelia), the Ghost's behaviour produces a similar impression, especially in the first scene, without quite the same explanation.⁸³ The idiosyncrasy of its appearances invites but does not offer any. So far, it is only possible to conclude that, according to the play's logic, there must be something in the founding knowledge of the plot itself that resists pure, straightforward communication but is, nevertheless, able to enter into its own relationship with the characters involved in the communication and influence

⁸³ The case of Marlowe's Mephistopheles in the B-text of *Doctor Faustus* is instructive here in that his presence is genuinely divided between the world of Faustus and Lucifer, his master, who constantly oversees the play in congregation with the other high-ranking demons.

them. In other words, unlike any other supernatural apparition in Shakespeare, the Ghost in *Hamlet* does not only represent a certain (unusual or secret) content but rather a peculiar power of appeal which, while baffling the witnesses' beliefs, also stimulates their faith and allegiance. As has already been noted above, Horatio becomes sure by the end of the first scene that the 'thing' will speak to young Hamlet and that it is 'needful in' their 'loves' and 'fitting' their 'duty' to 'acquaint' Hamlet with the phenomenon (1.1.153-54). It is certainly too obvious that such a decision is based on the fact that the apparition looks like Hamlet's father and that 'once.../It lifted up its head and did address/Itself to motion, like as it would speak' (1.2.215-27). However, it is also too obvious that, even though Horatio remains cautiously skeptical, this decision constitutes, as it were, the minimum hop leading to the major leap of faith in Hamlet's first address to the Ghost, thus hinting at the acceptance of the impossible – the identity of the Ghost and the dead king – which constitutes the *sine qua non* of the plot development. This acceptance of the Ghost's genuine otherness is, despite all the precautions of the 'seeming knowledge', quite consistent throughout the scene: from 'Who's there?' to 'Stay, illusion' to 'This *spirit*, dumb to us, will *speak* to him' (italics added).

Before returning to the particulars of the two main Ghost scenes in the first Act in order to elucidate the dynamics of this uniquely compromised dramatic communication, it is necessary to note the relationship to this situation of the other characters. Another fact of our latest comparison is that not only almost incidental characters such as Marcellus and Barnardo, and the more important one such as Horatio, get directly caught in the ghostly enigma of plot mediation. The fact that these characters are positioned on the physical periphery of the castle and the dramatic periphery of the plot certainly does not distinguish them from the more central characters with regard to

the awareness of the founding event. The commonly noted distinction between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Saxo's and Belleforest's versions of the story is indeed that in the latter the founding crime is not a secret. Turning this crime into a secret has not only deprived the protagonist and the secondary and peripheral characters of the centralising motif. Most importantly, it has deprived of it *the perpetrator himself*. To be sure, Claudius knows that he has committed the crime in the 'orchard' (W.W. Greg and Nicolas Abraham notwithstanding⁸⁴). But what he cannot know is whether anyone else knows. Thus, objectively, in the second scene of the first Act, when he and the young Hamlet first appear on stage, Claudius is quite self-assured and even less prepared to follow the plot of the original narrative than Hamlet, precisely because he is *the only one* who knows about the crime. His counterpart in Saxo's tale, Feng, knows that he has to be focused on his young nephew from the start for a very precise reason. Claudius does want Hamlet to stay in court, but his reason at that point seems motivated more by guilty generosity than murderous circumspection (although the latter is certainly never too far from his mind):

We pray you, throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father: for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne;
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son,
Do I impart toward you. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire:
And we beseech you, bend you to remain
Here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

⁸⁴ 'Hamlet's Hallucination', *Modern Language Review*, XII (1917), pp. 393-421 and 'The Phantom of Hamlet or the Sixth Act: Preceded by the Intermission of Truth', *Diacritics*, vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter, 1988), pp. 2-19.

(1.2. 106-116)

It is hard to imagine Feng addressing Amleth in such a manner. Thus, for Claudius to approximate the role of Feng, to assume the essential portion of the dramatic initiative in the plot, he is in need of mediation just as much as the young Hamlet. Moreover, this mediation must be concerned with the inner state of Hamlet's mind in great precision, which is a much more intricate task here than in Saxo's tale because not only cannot Claudius approach the matter directly – if there is anyone interested in queen's and his own reputation, it is certainly Claudius – but he cannot even start suspecting Hamlet properly without some drastic change in the latter's behaviour. He may certainly be concerned about Hamlet's melancholic rudeness and dejection in Act 1 scene 2, but he does not have anything serious yet to worry about. After all, Hamlet does make 'a loving and a fair reply' (1.2.121) to Claudius' and Gertrude's combined plea for him to stay: 'I shall in all my best obey you, madam' (1.2.120). It is hard to interpret this as a conscious expression of hidden menace. At this point, when Hamlet is about to break into his first soliloquy, he is speaking to them rather out of disgustful weariness, ready to say anything just to get rid of the happy couple's interfering presence – to 'walk out of the air' they have been breathing together since the scene's start. In itself, the moment is deeply poignant, as the ensuing soliloquy famously shows. This is not so much because of its extreme poetic intensity but because of its stark juxtaposition with the ultimate *ordinariness* of the situation, which precludes any possibility of action, except unpacking one's heart with words⁸⁵. His noble father died, his mother did not turn out to be exactly 'Niobe, all tears', and his uncle turned out a 'satyr' (which he, according to

⁸⁵ As John Jones puts it in *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*: 'While Hamlet is extraordinary, his situation is commonplace in that many men – men of unremarkable capacities – could have handled it efficiently' (42).

Hamlet, always was anyway). But what is one to do? Hamlet knows very well that women do not often turn literally into the rocks shedding never-ending tears for their husbands; the difference between old Hamlet and Claudius can be striking, but they are, as has been commonly noted, *brothers* and also only mortal humans, which in the later references become uneasily alike. The real tragedy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in the modern sense of the term, noted long ago by T.S. Eliot, is precisely the depressing *lack of criminality* of such a situation:

Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action... And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence. To have heightened the criminality of Gertrude would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet; it is just *because* her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing. ('Hamlet and his Problem', 101)

However, far from constituting an artistic failure, this initial premise is one of the play's deepest insights. The concealment of the crime – which itself is a modern feature in comparison with the original plot – reveals the degradation of the age which Hamlet so volubly and intensely deplures. The extremity of this condition can indeed be measured by the necessity to introduce an ostensibly archaic feature, the Ghost, to drive Ophelia insane⁸⁶, to involve a traveling company of actors and even a pirate ship, in order to make the action against this situation possible, at least in principle⁸⁷. However, even this is certainly not enough to make the action and resolution of this crisis straightforward.

⁸⁶ By contrast, it is possible to let the anonymous decoy-girl in Saxo's tale make a much more informed decision about being Amleth's or Feng's ally precisely because of the public knowledge of the crime. To be sure, Feng does not leave this knowledge unpolished but presents himself as the saviour of his brother's wife from the latter's cruelty. However, this ploy can do little to conceal the nature of the deed, let alone free Feng from implication in his brother's death altogether.

⁸⁷ It is remarkable that 'incest', which here, just as 'Niobe', 'Hyperion', and 'satyr', is much more figurative than literal, is *never* mentioned in the first soliloquy; it is the Ghost that first utters the word.

The concealment of the crime here is not just an incidental feature but is made possible largely because of its virtual *non-existence* in the way Shakespeare conceives the initial situation. The 'better wisdoms' of courtiers, after all, 'have freely gone/with' Claudius' marriage, as he proudly announces in his first speech (1.2.15-16) – therefore, it is not just the marriage itself in Hamlet's mind that turns the world of Elsinore overnight into an 'unweeded garden,/ That grows to seed' with 'things rank and gross possess[ing] it merely' (1.2.135-37). The deep collusion between the concealment of the founding crime and the ordinariness of the resulting situation for the 'world' makes the engagement with it not only virtually impossible, if it were not for the Ghost, but also so traumatic and 'accidental' that it results simply in annihilating all the major characters, except Horatio, which ensures that the seed of its unresolved crisis is intact as the story is being passed on.

3.3 Perturbèd Spirit

This certainly returns us to the Ghost and its uniquely problematic features as the primary mediator with more urgency. Its major feature stands out more sharply now: the already emphasised peculiar ordinariness of its appearance in its first scene in Act 1. To be sure, it comes ‘Armed at point exactly, cap-à-pie’ (1.2.200), with ‘martial stalk’ (1.1.66), and looks exactly like the dead king. Nevertheless, the main effect of the apparition resides exclusively in the public knowledge of the king’s death – which is, certainly, no slight matter, especially given its true circumstances. However, there is nothing in its appearance to suggest the difference between these and the official, innocuous account – as, for example, there is in the ghost of Banquo which is also a silent, appearing-disappearing figure, but which not only takes its place at Macbeth’s banquet table in an ordinary manner but is shaking ‘his gory locks’ at his murderer (*Macbeth*, 3.4.62-3), not unlike the ghost of Laius in Seneca’s *Oedipus Rex*, certainly known to Shakespeare and the audience of the period. Neither does it recall in words, in the first appearance, the crime done to the king as does the extraordinary ghost sequence of Richard Gloucester’s victims in Act 5 scene 3 of *The Life and Death of Richard the Third*, with its chilling refrain ‘despair and die!’, nor does King Hamlet’s Ghost appear as the ‘monstrous apparition’ that ‘comes upon’ Brutus in his tent. The latter’s reaction to this figure is very close to the one we witness in *Hamlet*’s first scene:

Art thou any thing?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That makest my blood cold and my hair to stare?
(*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.323-5)

What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? by heaven I charge thee, speak!
(*Hamlet*, 1.1.46-9)

The significant differences from *Hamlet* here are certainly the fact that the spirit appears to look nothing like Caesar, while King Hamlet's ghost proves unsettling precisely *because* it is instantly recognisable:

Barnardo Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.
Horatio Most like: it harrows me with fear and wonder.
(1.1.43-4)

This difference can be attributed to Brutus' weakening eyesight on which he himself blames the apparition at first:

How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?
I think it is the weakness of my sight
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
(*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.321-22)

Objectively, it is difficult to say what Caesar's ghost looks like in principle because there is no description of it either in stage directions or in references to it in the ensuing dialogue. Finally, the major difference between the two cases, already noted, is the psychological bond between Brutus and his revenant which grounds the situation and the emotion. The bond is deep here not only due to Brutus' relation to Caesar as such but also and rather because the ghost does not actually say that it is the ghost of Caesar; instead, it presents itself plainly as *Brutus*' 'evil spirit' (4.3.327). Moreover, unlike King Hamlet's ghost, this spirit openly announces the reason why it has appeared: 'To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi' (4.3.325). This approaches the starkly ominous tone of the witch scenes in *Macbeth* rather than the ambiguous visitation at Elsinore. To finish

with the differences between *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* regarding this matter, it is worth noting that King Hamlet's Ghost does not appear on the battlements as a man 'all in fire', as some of the 'prodigies' witnessed by Casca – with which Horatio, nevertheless, associates this figure, as we saw earlier. Partial explanation for that can be that Horatio is, as he describes himself at the memorable moment of Hamlet's death in the final scene, 'more an antique Roman than a Dane' (5.2. 322).

Curiously, the fiery aspect of the Roman apparitions would have, indeed, been very apposite for *Hamlet's* Ghost, if it were not, alas, for the express nature of its condition (revealed later to Hamlet):

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the *night*,
And for the *day* confined to fast in fires.
(1.5.9-11, emphasis added)

It seems reasonable to take this piece of information as the ultimate answer to all the questions about the mystery of its appearance: such is its 'doom'. However, apart from the much discussed fact that the Ghost's appearance and words are not taken at face value by anyone in the play, not the least by the late king's devoted son, this would not solve the objective question of understanding what it is exactly in this figure that makes it work in the given dramatic context – that is, enables it to unsettle the witnesses, especially the first ones, in the particular way which leads to the central point of plot mediation in its interview with young Hamlet – and all this almost *without* the traditional attributes of a ghost.

Another oddity of the Ghost worth noting in this context and this time exclusively peculiar to this play is manifested at the dramatic climax of the first scene: Horatio's 'crossing' of the apparition:

Enter Ghost

But soft, behold! lo, where it comes again!

It spreads his arms*

I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion!

(1.1.108-9)

The disputed stage direction '*It* spreads its arms*', in the various textual variants attributed either to Horatio or the Ghost itself, certainly points to a sort of spatial and, as far as it is possible, physical confrontation between the two characters. Apart from the fact that it may be indeed more logical to assume that it is Horatio that spreads his arms in an attempt to stop the figure, the more important fact is that this moment in Shakespeare is not only uniquely intense but markedly at odds with its subject. Crossing the path of a ghost, or standing at the place where the ghost had stood, was traditionally considered extremely life-threatening. In addition to the main legend regarding Hamlet's Ghost, according to which Shakespeare composed the scene in the Charnel House near a cemetery in London, there is another, quite Mozartian story according to which an actor in Shakespeare's company died after having twice crossed the way of a tall, grey man who, because of the actor's subsequent death, was considered to be a ghost (*The Variorum Hamlet*). The contrast between the latter anecdote and the climactic moment at hand is immediately remarkable: after Horatio crosses the Ghost, *nothing happens* to him. In all the other major cases of visitation in Shakespeare, except the current one, there is always an element of palpable adversity, even despite the overt denial of it by the haunted character.

It is possible to assume that the power that doomed the Ghost to walk in a certain place at a certain time also doomed it to assume a certain shape, qualities, and behaviour as is the case with the 'Gast of Gy' to which Greenblatt devotes an entire chapter in

Hamlet in Purgatory; in this context, it is naturally possible to rely on the already mentioned cultural reflex which, for Greenblatt (and Freud), would ensure the particular reactions to what is witnessed in the scene. However, this would not do justice to the obviously more-than-doctrinal complexity of the Ghost – indeed, to the very need of introducing it into the play in the first place. While the significance of its presence may not be straightforward, it is certainly not comparable to the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, who do not play any visible role in the precipitation of the plot itself, or the ‘Gast of Gy’ that is there to enhance the faith in Purgatory (or the doll Olympia and Coppelius whose significances are inseparable from Nathaniel’s inner state in Freud’s discussion of the uncanny with reference to Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*).

Instead, the figure of *Hamlet*’s Ghost and its crucial impact in the first scene recalls the crux of Hamlet’s first soliloquy and T.S. Eliot’s notion of the objective correlative. Both the recent remarriage of the queen and the figure of the Ghost have that negative significance (to use Eliot’s terms) which does not simply provoke an emotional reaction in excess of its object but, in this very negativity, conceals (and transmits) something inexpressible. At this juncture it is necessary to modify the initial designation of the most salient feature of *Hamlet*’s Ghost as ‘ordinary’ with more precision in relation to the peculiar dynamics of its compromised plot-mediation. The fact that it, unlike all other ghosts considered above, does appear but not to the perpetrator of the crime, nor with anything about itself to suggest a crime, nor at the moment when there is nothing major left to suggest, make the Ghost of King Hamlet, paradoxically and significantly, a *figure of concealment* just as much as, if not more than, a figure of

revelation⁸⁸. This is true not only about its 'dumb' appearance, as Horatio calls it, in the first scene, when the observers have to intuit that the Ghost must be there for someone else's sake (presumably, young Hamlet⁸⁹). When it finally gets to see young Hamlet later in Act 1 scenes 4 and 5, it does not start talking until they are able to conceal themselves from Horatio and the two soldiers. Further, the Ghost's very first lengthy oration is essentially an act of teasing concealment:

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

(1.5.9-22)

This is certainly very impressive, but *how is all this relevant to young Hamlet?* Why would the spirit of the father whom Hamlet obviously worships, to whom he has remained faithful to the point of risking his life in an otherworldly encounter – which the Ghost could appreciate in the short intense prelude to their interview at the end of scene

⁸⁸ Indeed, the unanimous response that it provokes successively in the soldiers, Horatio, and Hamlet is 'dreadful secrecy'. After Horatio finishes his report, Hamlet pleads with them:

'If you have hitherto conceal'd this sight,
Let it be tenable in your silence still;
And whatsoever else shall hap to-night,
Give it an understanding, but no tongue.
(1.2.246-49)

⁸⁹ It is certainly conceivable that the apparition could have led the soldiers to Claudius who is, after all, the late king's brother. The fact that it does not is certainly a very eloquent indication of the way the difference between the two brothers is perceived not just by young Hamlet.

4 – need to amaze him almost out of his mind, reducing him practically to the state of Macbeth, Richard, Brutus, or Seneca’s Oedipus? It is certainly true that, overtly, the Ghost professes to do exactly the opposite – that is, it only claims that it *could* reduce Hamlet to the state of a ‘fretful porpentine’. However, in reality the effect of this extended apophasis on young Hamlet is conspicuous. We have already noted the utterly disordered state in which Hamlet appears in Ophelia’s closet. In the second closet scene, when Hamlet encounters the Ghost again, Gertrude does describe his state with precision unwittingly recalling the Ghost’s opening speech:

Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep;
And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,
Starts up, and stands on end.

(3.4.119-22, italics added)

Thus, whatever the Ghost’s overt apophatic restraint, the depth of its effect on Hamlet is profound and indisputable – and already in scene 5 after the Ghost leaves. More importantly, precisely because of this apophasis – that is, a *seeming* restraint which in reality creates excess of communication – the Ghost manages not so much to spare his son the forbidden knowledge of his trauma but, on the contrary, to transmit it precisely in that form of pure affect, of a self-enclosed message which is impossible to metabolise into straightforward knowledge and which invades the psychosomatic realm of the host, exercising its affective influence under favourable conditions. This is what can be inferred from the fact that Hamlet switches into a distinctly ghostly shape after the interview for quite some time⁹⁰ which culminates in his appearance in Ophelia’s closet

⁹⁰ There are various hints at the beginning of Act 2 – e.g., Polonius’ sending money to Laertes with Reynaldo, the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who had to be sent for previously after Hamlet’s extraordinary change in behaviour persisted long enough to arouse Claudius’ suspicions, the return of the

as a spurned admirer; Gertrude's description of him, unwittingly and thus truly, reproduces Ghost's own description of what Hamlet would have looked like if he knew the secrets of the Ghost's 'prison house' (which, indeed, he does now because they are not what one sees there but what the sight *does to the observer*). The latter case is even more telling precisely because of the disputed nature of the Ghost's presence in the second closet scene. Here, in the scene's split and doubled reality, discussed above, the Ghost and its condition is 'peeped forth' by Hamlet's whole being just as much as it constitutes an autonomous physical presence.⁹¹ To put it in Lacanian style, by Act 3 the Ghost's message has turned Hamlet into a (g)host.

In the straightforward context of the interview scene, the apophanctic description of the 'prison-house' seems to have its straightforward function of 'stir[ring]' Hamlet's love and remembrance of his father. But apart from the commonly noted absurdity of the need to stir these feelings in Hamlet at this moment, the apophasis, as we have seen, mutates more and more into its opposite. As the scene develops, the Ghost abandons even the seeming restraint and becomes much more passionate, open, and even graphic about the crime against the king, about its perpetrator, and about his former queen. In the case of a straightforward communication whose purport is request of revenge, the following passage –

Now, Hamlet, hear:
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death

ambassadors from Norway – which suggest that several weeks at least must have passed between the end of Act 1 and the beginning of Act 2.

⁹¹ To emphasise the depth of Hamlet's ingestion, so to say, of the Ghost at this point, the directors sometimes make the Ghost invisible in the second closet scene to the audience as well.

Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.

(1.5.34-40)

– could have been enough. The Ghost has already found the young Hamlet ‘apt’, after the latter promised that he would ‘sweep’ to his revenge on ‘wings as swift/ As meditation or [indeed] as thoughts of love’ (1.5.29-31). However, the spirit goes on to rail against Claudius,

that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,--
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!--won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen

(1.5.43-46)

and certainly about the latter, the garbage-preying ‘lust’ (which in Q1 is capitalised).

Despite the tight time-limit of which this tirade against the traitorous couple makes it aware –

But, soft! methinks I scent the morning air;
Brief let me be.

(1.5.58-9)

– the Ghost goes on to substantiate his lament against the injury done to his pride by

this ‘most unnatural’ union (‘O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there/ From me...’

1.5.47-8) with an extraordinary description of the injury done to ‘all my smooth body’:

Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour doth posset

And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.

(1.5.61-73)

It is necessary to note here, at the climactic moment of this crucial scene, the stark contrast between the Ghost and the founding criminal act it is describing: the Ghost looks *nothing like* the poisoned king. The crime itself is literally concealed by the armour which covers it 'cap-à-pie', except the face, which in its turn is covered partially by the headpiece and by the 'sable silver'd' beard (1.2.242). Such a relationship between the Ghost's appearance and the truth of its message is certainly in deep affinity with the overall air of concealment that it inspires and also with the correspondingly divided state of reality at Elsinore, decried by Hamlet, before their interview (as was noted above). Only before the interview the mismatch between the appearance ('Niobe, all tears') and the subsequent revelation of its essence ('lust') seemed a symptom of an inexplicable, generalised condition ('the unweeded garden' that 'grows to seed', the 'satyr' that turns out to inhabit it). Now, this state can be certainly attributed to a very definite author and his, as the play gradually reveals, half-conscious consort:

O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,--meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.

(1.5.106-09)

Their marriage, awkwardly divided between 'mirth' and 'dirge', 'delight' and 'dole' (1.2.12-13), does conceal, with varying degrees of consciousness, the 'wicked speed' with which

was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd:
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head:
O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!
(1.5.74-80)

However, the crucial twist – and certainly one of the most discussed conundrums which the whole of the scene has been building up to – occurs at this concluding moment of the Ghost's speech. Its expected purport is to be a plea for restoration of the ruined dignity and splendour of the 'radiant' angel, who suffered 'damned defeat' at the hands of the serpent-brother and his 'most pernicious woman', as well as alleviation of its current painful condition ('unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd' – 'O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!'). Apart from the commonly perceived inconsistency which crops up already in the juxtaposition between this angelic splendour and the blossoming 'sins' of the late king, the striking peculiarity of the tenor of the Ghost's whole part here is its complete unconcern with 'pity' and restoration as such.

In the very first scene, Horatio's traditional plea

If there be any good thing to be done,
That may to thee do ease and grace to me
Speak to me
(1.1.148-50)

remains conspicuously unanswered. Later, at the start of their interview, right after they managed to get away from their anxious followers, the Ghost sternly cuts Hamlet short with 'Pity me not', after the latter is moved ('Alas, poor ghost!') by the Ghost's announcement that its 'hour is almost come' when it 'to sulphurous and tormenting

flames/ Must render up' itself (1.5.3-5). Neither does the Ghost seem concerned with improving the queen's spiritual well-being:

But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

(1.5.97-101)

This is certainly uncharacteristic of a traditional purgatorial spirit. Even more remarkable, or rather absolutely scandalous, as has been commonly noted (most painstakingly by Prosser) for such a spirit is its request for 'revenge' (which certainly threatens damnation to Hamlet). However, even though the request for revenge is quite in line with the Ghost's general tone of wrathful humiliation, it is problematised right from the start by the Ghost's designation of 'murder' as 'most foul, *as in the best it is*' (1.5.33). Furthermore, its 'taint not thy mind' and 'remember me' injunctions invert everything it has laid out after the general incriminating equation of the random 'snake' with Claudius and the revenge plea. The spirit unfurls all its humiliating misery to Hamlet, subjects him to the same mental or, rather literally, psychosomatic torture (evident right after their interview in Hamlet's 'O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;/And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,/But bear me stiffly up' 1.5.120-23), yet at the end asks him not to think about it – that is, literally *not to think about his father, the condition he is in now, the reality that his presence is replaced with*, i.e. his mother's so-called 'incest', *and thus to question the revenge action itself*. At the same time, these admonitions are meant to make Hamlet concentrate on remembering the father and on revenging his 'most unnatural murder' and not letting 'the royal bed of Denmark be/ A

couch for luxury and damned incest'(1.5.82-3)⁹². Thus, the short and easy introductory apophasis on the 'prison-house' is simply the Ghost's introduction of the major and much more contradictory one about the memory, incest, and revenge which constitutes the cornerstone of the entire plot and which it entrusts wholly to Hamlet.

This arrangement seems to be suited more to someone like Macduff who in Act 4 scene 3 of *Macbeth* manages to balance very quickly the manly 'feeling' and 'dispute' of the news that his family has just been annihilated by the 'devilish' tyrant:

O, I could play the woman with mine eyes
And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens,
Cut short all intermission; front to front
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;
Within my sword's length set him; if he 'scape,
Heaven forgive him too!

(4.3.273-276)

Certainly Laertes whose heady jumping into revenge conspiracy, first, for his father's murder and, then, Ophelia's madness and death, is also in a perfect opposition to Hamlet's ensuing 'brooding'(as the prince himself acknowledges⁹³). Fortinbras is certainly another prominent example of someone who does not hesitate to pursue his 'rights of memory'. One crucial advantage that Macduff, Laertes, and Fortinbras have over the young Hamlet is that none of them can be in doubt as to the circumstances of their relative(s)' demise (the specific doubt in Ophelia's case rather encourages vengeance). For Fortinbras and Macduff, there is the strong additional incentive of the political gain. Even in Laertes' case this also seems to be quite a possible prospect (as

⁹² The latter is not necessarily a plea for restoration because what the Ghost is explicitly concerned with is stopping the incest, not specifying either the means or the outcome.

⁹³ 'For, by the image of my cause, I see/The portraiture of his' (5.2.84-5).

the palace-storming 'rabble', as 'The ocean, overpeering of his list', shouts 'Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!', 4.5.71, 74, 80).

For Hamlet, the task is objectively much more problematic. The political benefit of revenge for him is no less significant and certainly quite easily achievable in comparison with the above-mentioned characters (which is clearly confirmed by Claudius' whole scheming against him), but the event of his father's death is much less certain, even and especially after the interview with the radically ambivalent figure of the Ghost ('spirit of health or goblin damn'd'). However, the difficulty certainly resides not just in the questionable reliability of the witness and evidence. It is their very nature that problematises the action that they (seem to) call for. It does not quite cancel the possibility of action altogether, as Hamlet proves indeed far from an absolutely passive, apathetic character he periodically presents himself to be. On the contrary, the instances of his rhetorical self-flagellation (the three major soliloquies in Acts 2, 3, and 4) represent a particular manner in which the encounter with the tormented Ghost perverted (but not extinguished) the action into this very self-accusing process. Adjusting Freud's often cited formulation from 'Mourning and Melancholia' to the case in hand, the unsettling encounter with the object that proves far from lost casts a thick shadow over and into Hamlet's being. It does not help that the object is elusive to the touch and the majority of the living population. The 'to be or not to be' soliloquy in Act 3 is certainly the most famous meditation on the matter: the meaning of action has become obscured due to the preoccupation with the nature of its boundaries; up till now, these boundaries, physical and metaphysical, have been all but hermetically closed by (the notion of) the 'bourn' of the 'undiscover'd country', which closure the Ghost certainly ruptures.

Goethe's classic characterisation of this situation is extremely eloquent and illuminating in its imagery:

To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant to represent a great deed imposed as a duty upon a soul that is not equal to it. Here is an oak-tree planted in a costly vase that should have nurtured only the most delicate flowers: the roots expand; the vase is shattered. A too pure, noble, highly moral nature, but without that energy of nerve which constitutes the hero, sinks under a burden which it can neither bear nor renounce. (qtd. in *Hamlet and Oedipus* 27)

Such an appraisal of Hamlet is certainly echoed by Ophelia after the nunnery scene:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
(3.1.150-54)

The only, no less compelling, adjustment to this view that has already been made by numerous critics after Goethe is that it is impossible to draw a clear-cut distinction as that between a 'costly vase that should have nurtured only the most delicate flowers' and an 'oak-tree' in Hamlet's case (and thus between 'to be' and 'not to be' options in the soliloquy). The unsettling and seducing power of the Ghost resides precisely in the fact that it is able to stir the affects which are already brewing in the first witnesses and later in the young Hamlet, without providing them with an adequate means to master them. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet's imagination is already boiling ('Let me not think on it!') and close to 'Vulcan's stithy' (3.2.48) – that is, his darkest moments in the play when he insults Ophelia, contemplates Claudius' murder and the fateful visit to the mother's closet. While overtly the Ghost urges Hamlet to contain the 'writings' of his imagination (as J.D. Wilson calls them) and translate them into action ('howsoever thou pursuest this act'), in reality the whole scene certainly catalyses their proliferation. Most

importantly, the apophantic nature of the Ghost's speeches reveals specifically that *it itself is essentially composed of these writhings* – rather than the cool resolve of Fortinbras or the hotheadedness of Laertes.

The Ghost in *Hamlet* is thus *neither* a pure revenge spirit *nor* a purgatorial spirit, which results in its, already noted, very unsettling effect as the plot mediator. In principle, its role was to lift the situation out of the stifling mundanity to the level of a determined dramatic conflict – that is, to return the plot to its own characters, and with it the ideals of justice, valour, loyalty, purity, integrity, and, primarily, even fate. This is what Horatio, and then Hamlet, associate it with at first sight ('If thou art privy to thy country's fate'; 'My fate cries out', 1.1.151; 1.4.92). Quite relevantly, it comes all decked out in armour, brandishing a truncheon, martially stalking and looking very austere. Horatio conveniently, though not very consistently with his age, remembers the fabulous moments of King Hamlet's military heroism, down to the expression on his noble face:

Such was the very armour he had on
When he the ambitious Norway combated;
So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parley,
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
(1.1.76-9)

However, these and other numerous details suggest a profound distance and inadequacy between the custom in the late king's heyday and the current situation in Denmark. It is not only Hamlet's idealising tone – e.g., 'He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again' (1.2.194-5). The, most probably, old-fashioned armour of the Ghost (featuring a 'beaver'), in which the king 'combated' 'the ambitious Norway', looks quixotically inconsistent with the cannon shots that resound throughout the play:

the former suggests the idealised heroic age of noble combat, the latter the real, indiscriminate and impersonal, slaughter of the increasingly industrialised modern warfare⁹⁴. The example of Fortinbras, 'a delicate and tender prince' (4.4.48), is the tellingly transitional case in point: he may want to produce the impression of a noble son of a noble father claiming his rights of memory in Denmark 'with sorrow' (5.2.338), but he is no Don Quixote: he 'sharked up a list of lawless resolute' to die for him in the senseless battle for an 'eggshell' (4.1.58). It may simply be to alleviate the frustration of his initial plans to invade Denmark or to use the 'eggshell' campaign as a springboard for the future invasion or both. In any case, he does not seem concerned to remember his father literally – that is, to challenge Claudius first to a single combat, 'prick'd on by a most emulate pride' (1.1.100). Neither is Claudius concerned to hold up the image of 'our most valiant brother. So much for him' (1.2.27) and confront Fortinbras in a joust: he is much more adept at conspiracy and diplomatic pressure (although he says he has 'served against the French' (4.7.68), it is really his 'Switzers' that tend to his security). The fact that young Hamlet and Laertes have been 'exercising' in courtly fencing and horse-riding while they, most probably both, have gone to university abroad⁹⁵ – not to forget the upbringing of young Osric – completes the picture of difference: it is hard to

⁹⁴ Emphasised to a great, if comic, effect in *I Henry IV* by the face-off between Hotspur and the unnamed foppish envoy (not unlike Osric) demanding the surrender of his prisoners in King's name and expressing his regrets that

it was great pity, so it was,
 This villanous saltpetre should be digg'd
 Out of the bowels of the harmless earth,
 Which many a good tall fellow had destroy'd
 So cowardly; and but for these vile guns,
 He would himself have been a soldier.

(1.3.62-7)

⁹⁵ Even Polonius has gone to 'university' and 'did enact Julius Caesar' there (3.2.60, 64).

imagine Saxo's Amleth being a 'scholar', a 'courtier', a playwright, and 'the glass of fashion'.

However, the difference between the Ghost's appearance and the current age is, in another respect, only *seeming*: the Ghost may look nobly old-fashioned, aloof, alien, austere, stern, and menacing; it may have come to demand revenge and expunction of the incest from the royal bed of Denmark – but, as we saw, it is itself obsessed, beyond question and measure, with the unseemly crime lying at the heart of the current reality. To radicalise this case, it can be pointed out again that, unlike other ghosts and despite all his armour and stern looks, it *never confronts* either the perpetrator or the guilt-conscious queen. Claudius' and Gertrude's behaviour in the *The Mousetrap* scene, the prayer scene, and the second closet scene, respectively, provides plentiful evidence to suppose that should the Ghost have presented itself to them both or severally, it would certainly have had a tremendous effect. To this insinuation that the king was a coward⁹⁶, it may be objected that there is the public record of his exploits⁹⁷. However, the contrast between this record reflected in the Ghost's appearance and its actual behaviour reflected in its secrecy and shying away from its direct enemies is indisputable. This contrast underscores the already noted problematic nature of the actual return of King Hamlet, observed in the context of Horatio's, the soldiers', and Hamlet's leap of faith regarding the identity of the Ghost. But this time, after considering the Ghost's interview with Hamlet in detail, it becomes obvious that the return of the old valiant king is problematic because he *himself* seems to be largely *an image* constituted by his very

⁹⁶ Developed, indeed, by Nicolas Abraham in his 'The Phantom of Hamlet or the Sixth Act'.

⁹⁷ It is noteworthy that throughout his famous 'delay', Hamlet comes to accuse himself of cowardice more and more bitterly ('Am I a coward?' (2.2.404); 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all' (3.1.93); Now, whether it be/Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple/Of thinking too precisely on the event,/A thought which, quarter'd, 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' (4.4.44-8).

historical remoteness, his death, and the queen's unseemly remarriage. At best, he used to be a great warrior, but he was murdered during his *habitual sleep in an orchard*. The valiance of his actual exploits may not be in itself disputable, although those who express their admiration for it in the play (young Hamlet and his fellow-student Horatio) can certainly not have witnessed it directly⁹⁸. However, the very *ideal* value that is attached to it in the play, not least quite immodestly by *the Ghost himself*, is the indication of its ghostliness, its intermediary status between the historical, dead king and the time that literally superseded him. This is again not to reduce the Ghost's character to a status of a mere projection but to underscore his own deep susceptibility to the myth of the great king which he *himself* is trying to save and project.

The very ease with which Claudius' extraordinarily awkward opening speech in Act 1 scene 2 refers to the court's unforced acceptance of his marriage is again a most telling piece of evidence in this respect:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
 The memory be green, and that it us befitted
 To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
 To be contracted in one brow of woe,
 Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
 That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
 Together with remembrance of ourselves.
 (1.2.1-7)

The point of the speech – which curiously approximates the Ghost's apophysis – is indeed to demonstrate the naturalness of forgetting, using the very example of '*our most valiant brother*'. And although this brother keeps cropping up throughout, not unlike the

⁹⁸ Hamlet was, indeed, born on the very day when King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras, if we are to believe the gravedigger. More particularly, the editors of *The Variorum Hamlet* have pointed out the absurdity of the apparently valiant looking smiting of the 'sledded Polacks in an angry parley' – i.e. what is so valiant about smiting someone who is riding a sleigh? – They suggest that the king frowned and smote his 'sledded poleax' out of impatience while sitting in a sleigh and holding some diplomatic talks on the neutral territory.

things that the Ghost professes not to talk about, this happens in the context associating him firmly with death, with what is past, and with the attitudes to it which are considered proper, 'wise', and thus shared by everyone. Hamlet's mournful posture is certainly quite at odds with all this, but precisely because of this opposition, it is considered by Claudius, Gertrude, and presumably Polonius and the rest of the court, to be childish – from the peevish aside 'a little more than kin and less than kind' to Claudius' characterisations of him, indeed, as 'peevish', 'obstinate', 'impious', 'stubborn', 'unmanly', 'impatient', 'simple and unschool'd':

For what we know must be and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd: whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
'This must be so.'

(1.2.102-10)

Claudius' logic, centred around the 'first corse', may be very slippery (it is, indeed, that of a murdered brother and not the naturally deceased father), but Hamlet does not pick up on this inconsistency. He does accuse Claudius, his mother, and everyone else whose opinion went freely with the 'affair' of putting on a 'show' of mourning, while professing that his own mourning corresponds to 'something within' him which 'passeth show' (1.2.89). However, the fact of the matter is that no one, apparently, *even pretended* that mourning for them was significantly more than a formal, virtually empty gesture, with regard to the old king – an acknowledgement of tradition which has all but been replaced by the voice of 'nature' and 'reason': 'this must be so'. Evidently, having gone to great length to conceal the true nature of the King's death, Claudius did not

count on anyone's, least of all Hamlet's, 'obstinate condolence'. Neither should he, apparently, have expected it from a Wittenberg student. The fact that Hamlet's 'intent in going back to school' is 'most retrograde' to Claudius' desire may be ascribed, apart from his guilty generosity, to his frustration with the effect it has apparently had on Hamlet: Claudius' speeches make him sound like a much better protestant than his nephew.

Furthermore, at the end of his first soliloquy, Hamlet does voice a vague sense that the 'wicked speed' of marriage cannot come to good (parallel to Horatio's sense of 'strange eruption' at the sight of the Ghost in the previous scene); however, he himself does not really mourn for his father in a traditional manner but just like Claudius and, most importantly, the Ghost, *who never asks for it*, is shown to be caught up in a compulsive and painful contemplation of what *replaced* the mourning in this situation. The Lacanian designation of the Ghost as 'phallus' (faithfully developed by Garber and Lupton and Reinhard) seems apposite here to a certain extent because the objective fact of the play is that, despite their professedly progressive views on 'mourning', both Claudius and Gertrude know perfectly well that their lack of mourning is just an awkward mask (as Claudius puts it, while testing Laertes' readiness, 'the painting of a sorrow,/a face without a heart' 4.7.90-1). For them, mourning as such, whether they believe in it or not, is impossible. Gertrude may not be privy to the full truth of the former king's death, but, nevertheless, she does confess to the unseemly nature of her relationship with Claudius, and therefore the impossibility of mourning, after Hamlet's invective in the closet scene:

O Hamlet, speak no more:
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;

And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

Hamlet Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty, –

Gertrude O, speak to me no more;
These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears;
No more, sweet Hamlet!

Hamlet A murderer and a villain;
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket!

Gertrude No more!

(3.4.99-116)

From the start, the mourning itself, despite Lacanian emphasis on it⁹⁹, is irrelevant. Rather, it is, in the generalised terms of psychoanalytic criticism, a symptom of some concealed affliction, the ‘something rotten in the state of Denmark’, which cannot ‘resolve itself into a dew’ precisely because, *for a murder*, there cannot be an adequate way of doing it in traditional terms. This does not refer to the abolition of purgatory and catholic faith in the contemporary period as such but is based on the particularities of the plot situation. The play represents the fact in the context of what Claudius and Hamlet say in their opening scene. If Claudius believes that extensive, meaningful mourning is irrelevant, why all this elaborate, ostentatious balancing of ‘defeated joy’ – ‘an auspicious and a dropping eye’, ‘mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage’, ‘In equal scale weighing delight and dole’ (1.2.) – in his behaviour? The only answer seems to be that it is his guilty attempt to use, not even the obsolete social custom but *a pretense* at

⁹⁹ ‘From one end of *Hamlet* to the other, all anyone talks about is mourning’ (‘Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*’, 39).

it, as an impossible payment for what it, by definition, cannot repay. Later in the same scene, when Hamlet is talking to Horatio about the wedding, he uses the celebrated expression

Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
(1.2.186-7)

Precisely because of his laboriously dismissive rhetoric in the same scene, Claudius can hardly have a different impression of his affair with Gertrude. And *it is with this knowledge in mind* that he is enjoying this marriage nevertheless; that is, what he and Gertrude are enjoying, perversely and thus painfully, is indeed the *death* of their former king and relative, the 'cold meat'. This enjoyment corresponds exactly to what the Ghost stands for and Claudius voices in the prayer scene – a profound psychosomatic torment at, but also the lack of alternative for, the impossibility of mourning and prayer, not unlike the Faustian inability to accede to 'one drop' of 'Christ's blood' that 'streams in the firmament' and that 'would save my soul' (*Dr Faustus A*, 5.2.70-1):

O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will:
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd

Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
(3.3.42-61)

While Marlowe's Faustus may be luckier in that he at least has the good angel, his fellow-students, and the virtuous old man (in the B-text) visiting him, praying for him, and giving him examples in spiritual courage till the last minute, the angels in Claudius' case are conspicuously silent (and the Ghost never mentions them, except to compare itself to one, rather improvidently, which only underscores their difference). In this juxtaposition of the Ghost and Claudius it is thus apparent that Claudius' crime is indeed primal in that it by its very *intra*-familial nature fundamentally alters the relationship between the dead and the living. It seems to destroy literally the very possibility, the promise, of a meaningful exchange between them through mourning (however inadequate in itself it could be considered) on *both sides of the eternal divide*.

This is proved not only by Claudius' defective prayer but, as has already been noted, by the whole scene of the Ghost's interview with Hamlet and its later appearance in Gertrude's closet. The Ghost does not come to ask, traditionally, for prayers or even to instruct Hamlet properly in the matter of revenge. Its one express request to spare Gertrude, as was already observed, is not really concerned with saving her soul. Apparently, the Ghost has indeed come not only his 'tardy son to chide' but to point out to Hamlet enigmatically that

amazement on thy mother sits:
O, step between her and her fighting soul:
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works:
Speak to her, Hamlet.

(3.4.128-31)

The objective result of this intervention *without showing himself to Gertrude* at the moment when Hamlet has all but pierced through to her conscience (in the above quoted 'Hamlet, speak no more!' passage) is, as Prosser most perceptively pointed out, that she feels let 'off the hook' because her son is talking to the 'incorporal air' and, therefore, 'alas', is 'mad' (3.4.135); this makes it easier for Gertrude to disregard everything Hamlet has said about the murder, shield Claudius from Laertes later (perhaps, even with her own body), and thus contribute to the final duel scheme and her own unwitting and thoroughly unprepared demise (very similar to the old Hamlet's). The Ghost may not have intended any of this in his brief appearance in the closet, but it certainly does not appear as the 'Gast of Gy' to instruct his wife, beyond any doubt, in the necessity to repent. Of all the characters, it is the Ghost who should have stepped between 'her and her fighting soul'. Therefore, Prosser's insistence that, in the context of other suggestive features, the Ghost appears as a demonic spirit is compelling. Indeed, the general attitude towards the apparition in the play is rather binary ('spirit of health or goblin damn'd'), with no mention of the middle state – and quite a few critics have found enough ground in the play's material to assign the Ghost explicitly to 'the kingdom of hell' (as even Lacan does in his 'Desire in *Hamlet*' (44)).

However, this cannot be true precisely because if we stick to the letter of what the Ghost says about its condition in the already quoted passage –

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.

– it is quite explicitly purgatorial. The conflicting presence of the revenge demand here suggests rather, as Greenblatt insists, a radical imaginative reinvention of the

decomposing catholic, and generally Christian, paradigm. In the context of the Reformation's dramatic splitting of the Christian world and doctrine, the Ghost represents a curious spirit that, indeed, *is* in the middle state, suffering a limited term in purging fire but, most importantly, *not seeking* traditional intercession from the living. What we can infer from his behaviour is that it simply comes to pass onto the living the torment of its impossible state – the very torment under which some are already toiling in various degrees of consciousness (Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet) and which these will spread to others (Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes).

The overwhelming concentration on its wounds and the most vulnerable spots of the living at the expense of relief, which motivates the Ghost, thus not only distinguishes him from the traditional purgatorial or demonic spirit (that is much more concerned with capturing mortal souls than obsessed with transmission of its secret pain) but also from the straightforward designation of it as 'phallus' and/or 'Other' in the Lacanian readings. It is not a signifier (or *the* Signifier) precisely because of its deep, personalized suffering. The particular facial expressions and modes of movement that it assumes throughout its presence on stage ('It is offended'; 'it stalks away'; 'So frown'd he once'; 'it [...] being so majestic'; 'It was about to speak'; 'it started like a guilty thing/Upon a fearful summons'; 'Look you, how pale he glares!'; 'His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,/Would make them capable. Do not look upon me;/Lest with this piteous action you convert /My stern effects') are beyond inert, fixed signification and irreducible to the inanimate phallic representations which the 'Ancients' employed in their mysteries and to which Lacan explicitly refers in a related context¹⁰⁰. The Ghost is

¹⁰⁰ 'The Signification of the Phallus', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2002), p. 275.

not dead, impersonal, and impenetrable in the same way as this schematic image is. He is neither the partial object with which Lacan contrastively juxtaposes his notion of the phallus nor only the representation of the forbidden object of desire ('the funeral bak'd meats') which both Claudius and Gertrude perversely enjoy 'in the real'. In a sense quite opposite to the abstraction of the phallus as the fantasmatic object, it is the very king himself turned 'cap-à-pie' into one throbbing wound, shamefully but ineffectually, covered with armour. It may have once been a noble, Hyperion-like, valorous king, but the age (as it is shown by the player-king in *The Murder of Gonzago*) and above all the brother's and his wife's secret crime have reduced him to a 'thing of nothing', a mere bundle of human imperfections, which not only must be painfully purged but which, in their very ignominy, constitute the Ghost's great torment ('O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!') and inspire his narcissistic and, paradoxically because of this, sympathetic maliciousness.

3.4 Conscience

This tortured state (neither wholly Christian nor wholly vindictive), which, as we have seen, is transmitted to Hamlet and precludes straightforward revenge, certainly enables the Ghost to elicit a peculiar sense of compassion. In the light of the main question regarding the uniqueness of the Ghost and its role as the primary plot mediator, this state can be described at this point, indeed, as *humanity* amounting to the impossible return of the dead king, which thus constitutes its uniqueness. The extraordinary imagery of Hamlet's initial response to the Ghost is deeply suggestive:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee: I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane: O, answer me!
Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws,
To cast thee up again. What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous; and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
Say, why is this? wherefore? what should we do?
(1.4.45-63)

There is an apparent contradiction with the actual 'majestic' appearance of the Ghost that has nothing in itself to suggest a 'corse' 'inurn'd' for quite some time now. It is indeed as his newly returned 'father' that Hamlet addresses the Ghost, asking him to enlighten them on the meaning of king's 'canoniz'd bones' return. In terms of

Laplanche's discussion in 'Seduction, Persecution, Revelation', Hamlet's leap of faith in this address resembles the peculiar compulsion to enter into a deep identificatory relationship with the other based on unexpected recognition of a prior bond between them, which is thus irreducible to a straightforward projection. Here it is not only the obvious father-son relationship but the already observed intense and *bilaterally* enigmatic modality of it that vouchsafes the peculiar reality of the other and his message (despite the apparent psychoanalytic consensus on the abstract, projective nature of this relationship). In more recent psychoanalytic studies, the Ghost's reality has been linked to the notion of trauma and its specifically intermediate, irreducible position between the two, temporally distinct, pathogenic events. Heather Anne Hirschfield, for example, in her essay 'Hamlet's "*first corse*": Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology'¹⁰¹ proposes a compelling reading of the Ghost-Hamlet relationship in the context of a psychoanalytically interpreted puritan typology and, in particular

the ways in which Shakespeare's play is organized according to a narrative of repeated and deferred recognitions...[Hirschfield suggests] that this pattern represents Hamlet's response, precipitated by the death of his father, to the traumatizing impact of the doctrine of Original Sin [that is] the psychic ramifications of a theological precept that depicts a scene of primal transgression and loss which configures parental generativity as both consequence and cause of sin and death. (426)

In response to Michael Neill's and Greenblatt's related arguments, which assign the play to the species of

a compensation for lost Catholic ritual, functioning "as a response to a particularly painful aspect of the early modern reimagining of death—the wholesale displacement of the dead from their familiar place in the order of things by the Protestant abolition of purgatory and ritual intercession [(Neill, *Issues of Death*, 46)]". (436)

¹⁰¹ *Shakespeare's Quarterly*, vol.54, No.4, winter 2003, pp. 424-448.

Hirschfield sets out to reintegrate the psychological ('traumatic') aspect of the play into its Christian ('redemptive') problematics. Unlike her acknowledged predecessors along this route, Adelman and Garber, who relied on the Lacanian emphasis on the mother's perverse *jouissance* and the father's 'sin', respectively, to interrogate the possibility of redemption in the play, Hirschfield relies on Laplanche's theory of trauma essentially for the same purpose: to maintain the traumatic (and dramatic) negativity of the revenant-father as a factor that does not so much make the redemption impossible in the play, as suspend its entire logic when related to the contemporary typological canon (Hirschfield, *ibid*)¹⁰². In the context of this latest radical reassessment of the play's problematics from the Laplanchean position, the current analysis intends to insist on quite the opposite emphasis: namely, that it is this very negativity of the father, with its baggage of the double trauma of the Original Sin and primal fratricide¹⁰³, that provides the only hope for redemption, however demonic, traumatic, or purely devastating it may seem. This hope resides in the very impossibility of the Ghost, its poignantly human challenge to the nature and structure of things at Elsinore – that is, the physical laws, the 'seeming' doctrinal knowledge, the 'seeming' normality of the situation at court, as well as the theatrical canon. This challenge, full of traumatic pathos, is well offset by Falstaff's no less human but comic and (literally) down-to-earth challenge to the code of honour and valour when he 'counterfeits' death in the fight with Douglas, and then is taken by Hal and Lancaster, characteristically, for a 'fantasy/ that plays upon our eyesight' (*1 Henry IV* 5.4.126-7). More importantly, the Ghost does not come to the battlements, like Emma in the classical Freudian trauma study, driven by the mechanism of which it is

¹⁰² Avi Erlich, in his *Hamlet's Absent Father*, gravitates towards the same conclusions.

¹⁰³ For, as Laplanche formulates it in *The New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, 'it always takes two traumas to make a trauma' (88).

completely unaware or as a character completely coincident with its paradigm; on the contrary, it comes, to use Hamlet's words about the player, eventually to

Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
(2.2.544-46)

The match here is certainly not exact, for young Hamlet and then Ophelia (not to mention Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) are not guilty in the same way as Claudius and even Gertrude are. However, by the very lack of a straightforward revenge equivalence and the overall idiosyncratic exclusivity of its haunting, which leads to the insanity and death of the innocent, the Ghost does not only 'reveal' and 'confirm' the traumatic, contaminating link between innocence and primal crime which underlies reality at Elsinore and, generally, the double structure of trauma, as Hirschfield argues (423) – but explodes it. The morally paralysing atmosphere of the court after Gertrude's remarriage may indeed be a confirmation of both the Original Sin and Hamlet's brooding intuition; and the ensuing 'bloody acts' based on his acquaintance with the Ghost may be the matching pieces of the traumatic puzzle. However, the very appearance of the spirit which underlies this sequence, as Horatio intuits from the beginning, turns it rather into an 'eruption', which does not so much defy or confirm mortality in a straightforward manner but opens up its traumatic nature and structure to experience, conflict, meditation, and thus, to use Laplanche's term, *metabolisation*¹⁰⁴.

This is made possible precisely because the Ghost, unlike Freud's Emma, or more

¹⁰⁴ Unlike the classic Lacanian emphasis which makes *Hamlet* a representation of 'the level in the subject in 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.' ('Desire in *Hamlet*', 12) to which Hirschfield's use of Laplanche uncannily approximates.

pertinently, mad Ophelia, comes back with a *full conscience* of its trauma¹⁰⁵. This conscious survival is not that of a more or less psychological crisis, which may leave consciousness in more or less damaged but essentially functional state; it is a survival of the *ultimate* trauma which is supposed to wipe out consciousness and life itself and thus the very hope of survival. One crucial implication of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' meditation is the noted paradox of everyone rushing to make their 'quietus' with a 'bare bodkin' if they were absolutely sure that there is indeed *no such hope* beyond the 'bourn' of this 'weary life' (3.1.87). And it is the Ghost representing in all its tormenting ambivalence the unnamed nightmarish 'dream' in that 'sleep of death' that, paradoxically, is the unlikely guarantor and instigator (the 'linchpin' although not entirely catholic¹⁰⁶) of survival and action.

To be sure, the lines of the soliloquy which refer to this issue –

who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 (3.1.86-92)

– are some of the most disputed ones in the play, because they seem to be in a stark contradiction with the crucial event of the Ghost's visitation. However, it should be remembered that at this point in the play Hamlet is indeed contemplating action (*The Mousetrap*) with the Ghost's story in mind and is thus distancing his *own* particular case

¹⁰⁵ In the play, conscience is certainly found in the 'pregnant' state of combining the (now obsolete) meaning 'inward awareness' with the modern one, 'moral sense' or 'insight'.

¹⁰⁶ Roy Battenhouse's term in 'The Ghost in *Hamlet*: a Catholic "Linchpin"?', *SP* XLVIII (1951), pp.161-192.

from 'us', made 'cowards' by the 'conscience'. To be even more precise, Hamlet's 'us' here, at the start of Act 3, must refer primarily to Hamlet himself in Act 2 where he becomes bitterly conscious, especially after the actor's Pyrrhus-Priam-Hecuba speech, of the apparent lapse in his behaviour:

I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
(2.2.399-404)

However, this lapse and Hamlet's painful awareness of it, resurging in the next two acts, is inseparable from the kind of action that he finds himself confronted with in his plot. Hamlet's progress through the action after Act 2 is necessarily far from the imposing and straightforward Trojan case, not so much because he, in psychoanalytic terms, is compelled to revisit and reproduce his own, secret and ignominious, traumatic event *in spite* of his apparently heroic conscious will, but precisely because what the Ghost has stimulated to the utmost in Hamlet's already susceptible mind is the peculiar *act of conscience*. The Lacanian critics who follow the master in assigning to Hamlet the status of the character who lost his 'phallus', and thus his 'desire' and action, due to the choice of his 'm(O)ther' disregard the dramatic reality which represents desire here precisely in a strong *ethical* opposition to the more straightforward demand-driven action – indeed, in the very ethical dimension of difference between 'need' and 'demand' which Lacan himself assigns to desire elsewhere¹⁰⁷. As the play amply demonstrates, it is not only quite easy to devise and commit acts – from eavesdropping to invasion – but that it is

¹⁰⁷ 'desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)' ('The Signification of the Phallus', 276).

this very ease of action, couched in terms of 'nature', 'custom', 'duty' etc., as opposed to the act of conscience in its full implication, that corrupts the subjects and leads directly to the founding crime and ease of its concealment. The Ghost comes, as we saw, to make Hamlet face this corruption and urges him, accordingly, not to revenge the crime straightforwardly ('howsoever thou pursuest this act') but, virtually, to invent such a form of vengeance that would remain completely conscious of its revolting cause and purpose ('the 'damnèd incest' and 'foul murder, as in the best it is') and yet would not let it taint his mind and the remembrance of his father ('remember me'). The fact that Hamlet explicitly comes to an agonizing awareness of lapse in action and to the doubt about the Ghost's nature does not really point to the lapse in his desire: on the contrary, his desire indeed *is* to 'catch the conscience' of everyone who is busy putting on acts around him from the start. The Ghost certainly encourages this desire by the whole traumatic ambiguity of its figure and message, which makes its inclusion among the objects of catching no surprise. On the surface, this inclusion at the end of the above quoted soliloquy ('the spirit that I have seen/May be the devil' 2.2.433-4), cropping up completely unprepared by the foregoing Act, certainly looks like a poor, neurotic excuse. However, taking into account the extraordinariness of the case, the obsessive-compulsive diagnosis, commonly applied to Hamlet in modern studies, or the more traditional tag of 'delay', is inadequate. Throughout the second Act – and further on – Hamlet does not simply avoid doing something fairly straightforward and innocuous for no rational reason, because he is unconsciously compelled to create an obstacle to his desire (such an interpretation, as Prosser rightly pointed out, makes for a peculiarly bloodthirsty critic¹⁰⁸). On the contrary, the stake in Hamlet's revenge is the 'soul', his

¹⁰⁸ 'Whenever I see the play, I wonder at those who, in the calm of the study, hail this rash and dangerous

own, his mother's, uncle's, and everyone else's, which *in itself* is an impossible object for a mortal to act on. Hamlet's general 'doubt', 'brooding', or 'delay', as has already been suggested, represents his peculiar acceptance of the Ghost into his own distracted globe – which he performs right after the interview. He may vow to 'wipe away all trivial fond records,/All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past' (1.5.107-8) from the 'table of his memory' and his 'distracted globe' (1.5.106, 105), but it is certainly no easy task. And his 'weakness' and 'melancholy' which follow and against which he constantly grates (rather than simply pining away) testify precisely to that peculiar acceptance of the other – the father's spirit and message – that was already discussed. They are precisely the susceptible, passionate soil (rather than Goethe's simply 'delicate vase') to which the father's message is able to return. With this charge of welcoming the familiar 'stranger', Hamlet now has to be on the look-out for *his* own conscience as well. He has to confront and master the baser matter of his weaknesses in order to do his charge justice.

But, first of all, precisely because of Hamlet's passionate core – very similar to Oedipus' – there cannot be a precise strategy from the start. Following Goethe's metaphor (which here anticipates Laplanche's theory of translation), the strategy gradually grows through Hamlet's interaction with the world in the aftermath of the interview. The psychological insight of the text presents Hamlet in the state of accommodating himself to the traumatic extraordinariness of his case and task. It has been objected at least since Wilson to Greenblatt, and most radically by Eagleton, that such an interpretation is a misguided, unnecessary psychological rationalisation of

hothead [Laertes] as "a blast of fresh air" who has the loyalty and courage to act as we want Hamlet.' (*Hamlet and Revenge*, 213 – in reference to G. Wilson Knight's position in *Wheel of Fire*, p.40).

Hamlet's purely irrational character that simply resists 'available definitions'¹⁰⁹. If *Hamlet* were written (e.g.) by Beckett (or, indeed, Lacan), where alienation and absurdity are absolute, this objection would have certainly made sense. As it is, it disregards the uniqueness of the plot based on the dramatic uniqueness of the Ghost. Hamlet has a distinct ethical inclination and reason to resist the 'available definitions' because it is *they* that lapsed, not he ('The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!', 1.5.211-12) – *even* according to the perpetrator himself, as was already observed. The ideal may seem unattainable but, nevertheless, it is conceivable:

'Sblood, there is something in this more than
natural, if philosophy could find it out.

(2.2.267)

¹⁰⁹ See the quotation from Eagleton's *William Shakespeare* discussed above on page 214. 150

3.5. His Sword Seemed i'th' Air to Stick

It is certainly not enough to assert that Shakespeare's plot, based on the secret crime and unverifiable elusive witness/victim, progresses according to a peculiar process of psychological growth rather than to a traditional dramatic formula and that, as a result, it amounts not to an aleatory, 'baroque' sequence (as Lupton and Reinhard characterise it), resisting all 'available definitions', but to a glimpse of an aesthetic and ethical alternative rooted in its very accidental nature. Appreciation of the possibility and relevance of such a reading requires further detailed investigation of the relationship between the practicalities of *Hamlet's* dramatic sequence and its ambiguous psychological/aesthetic dimension from Act 2 onwards.

It is worth resuming the investigation with restating the essential facts of the first Act in terms of the plot's later progression: after the interview with the Ghost, Hamlet emerges with a particularly 'wounded name' – the name of his father, entrusted to his care, which, in its turn, aggravates Hamlet's own deep mental agony.

The net effect of the Ghost on the plot's precipitation towards revenge is in itself quite negative. Hamlet is not a lot better oriented now than he was in the state of mental nausea and vague suspicions towards the end of Act 1 scene 2. The progress from Act 1 to Act 2 amounts in general terms to a peculiar modification of the original impasse: instead of asking the question 'what is to be done with a seemingly inexplicable, 'natural' corruption of the state?', Act 2 seems to be asking what is to be done with the 'wondrous strange' incriminating knowledge about the root of this corruption? The problem of transition from knowledge to action after Act 1 has certainly been one of the key issues in the *Hamlet* debate at least since Thomas Hanmer's deliberations in 1736.

The key assumption in these and later deliberations is that the issue of usability of the knowledge received in the first Act is what Hamlet himself as the protagonist is constantly deliberating on. Indeed, for some 19th century critics the particularly legal unreliability of the Ghost's evidence, the impossibility of bringing Claudius to public justice, was indeed the crux of the tragedy.

However, it is certainly quite conspicuous that public inquest, characteristic of Oedipus' case, or any open deliberation on the importance of immediate action, is far from Hamlet's mind for almost the complete length of Act 2. Unlike Oedipus, Hamlet does not seem to separate either himself or almost anyone else from the corruption he is witnessing, which implicitly undermines the very possibility of action against it in Denmark ('for me, 'tis a prison' and the man 'quintessence of dust' – 2.2.250). He has too intimate a knowledge¹¹⁰ of that 'vicious mole of nature', the 'dram of evil', which 'Doth all the noble substance over-daub/To his own scandal' (1.4.25, 37-39):

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things
that it were better my mother had not borne me.

(3.1.124-5)

Hamlet's meaning in this later moment is certainly, as Adelman emphasises, that it is specifically *because* of his mother, and thus the deepest level of his 'natural' being, that he is now able to lay such accusations on himself and the rest of man and womankind. And, indeed, it is the very secrecy of the crime – and the Ghost's nature – that seems to provide the last defense for the name of the late King from 'corruption' of 'general censure'; for the not too sensitive and uninformed public he is still the 'valiant king'.

¹¹⁰ To which Oedipus can admit only to a much lesser extent when, half way into the play, he is trying to explain to Jocasta why he took the apparently ridiculous jibe of the drunk-man more seriously than truthfulness of his loving (Corinthian) parents.

The rivals of Hamlet's watch intuitively appreciate the importance of preserving this status quo from the very start. Their intuition is wildly rewarded in the shifting-ground ritual of swearing to secrecy immediately after the interview. Its main purpose must be to make the secret as 'wondrously' strange and incommunicable as possible. J.D.

Wilson's reading of the moment which interprets the bizarre combination of the Ghost's grave endorsement of the oath and Hamlet's impudent quipping on this endorsement¹¹¹ as virtually deliberate masquerade, leading the minds of the secondary witnesses as far away from the grave truth of the apparition as possible, is certainly much more compelling than Prosser's and Greenblatt's respective and exemplary emphases on the demonic and purgatorial aspects of the scene as such.¹¹²

The other part of the oath in the ritual concerns the 'antic disposition' which Hamlet 'perchance hereafter shall think meet to put' on (1.5.193-94). This, famously, contradicts the rationale of the first part, for Hamlet's strange 'lunacy' indeed makes the others eager to pluck out the heart of its mystery rather than leave it alone. Amleth's dissimulating tactic in Saxo's chronicle, by contrast, is perfectly logical because his bizarre preparations for revenge have the conscious purpose of dissembling the plot and simultaneously drawing Feng and his retinue into it. In this respect, Hamlet's decision to put on an antic disposition as a finishing touch to the secrecy ritual seems to suggest a conscious step towards developing a similar strategy against Claudius and his courtiers. But the problem (already perceived by Hanmer in 1736) with what Act 2 shows us of

¹¹¹ the 'purgatorial tag' *Hic et ubique* and the derogatory 'Ah, ha, boy! say'st thou so? art thou there, truepenny?', 'old mole', 'worthy pioneer' (1.5.171, 184, 185), associated traditionally with the evil spirits.

¹¹² However, despite Wilson's emphasis on Gertrude's reputation in this context, it is indeed for the father's sake and with the father's explicit inspiration and involvement that the ritual is performed (and, indeed, aimed *against* the mother's confidence).

Hamlet's current behaviour and the behaviour in the interim is that it lacks Amleth's teleological precision at the equivalent stage in the narrative:

In a word, you would not have thought him a man at all, but some absurd abortion due to a mad fit of destiny. He used at times to sit over the fire, and, raking up the embers with his hands, to fashion wooden crooks, and harden them in the fire, shaping at their lips certain barbs, to make them hold more tightly to their fastenings. When asked what he was about, he said that he was preparing sharp javelins to avenge his father. This answer was not a little scoffed at, all men deriding his idle and ridiculous pursuit; but the thing helped his purpose afterwards. Now it was his craft in this matter that first awakened in the deeper observers a suspicion of his cunning. For his skill in a trifling art betokened the hidden talent of the craftsman; nor could they believe the spirit dull where the hand had acquired so cunning a workmanship. (*Gesta Danorum* qtd. in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 178).

Hamlet may have vengeance on his mind (as his 'tables' soliloquy, after the Ghost's descent in to the cellarage, seems to imply), but it is difficult to discern anything in his activity in the second Act that would suggest an exercise of an intelligible 'workmanship' with an ulterior purpose. Indeed, as he acknowledges to the newly arrived Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, *forgone all custom of exercises*; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

(2.2.251, italics added)

It is true that at that point in the Act Hamlet has essentially lost all the trust he (may have) had in his 'excellent good friends'. However, what he tells them here reflects quite faithfully not only the knowledge of the rest of the court (whom he has reasons to deceive) but the perception of the audience; for the most of the Act, Hamlet has no asides or soliloquies. So it is certainly remarkable that the audience, but most

importantly, Claudius and the rest of the onstage court, are drawn to Hamlet's behaviour none the less. Admittedly, the audience may be fascinated by the sheer spectacle of the character while Claudius is drawn into a more and more specific 'suspicion', not unlike that of the court in Saxo, by this dazzling and disturbing display. The insightful dramatic difference between Saxo and Shakespeare here is certainly that in the latter the character no longer has to do anything even remotely meaningful or menacing in itself (like fashioning crooks) to arouse fascination and suspicion. Indeed, it is because he does 'nothing' that the two are aroused even more in this case. The 'workmanship' is transposed into the creation of Hamlet's idleness which provides a dissimulation so effective that it appears to hide the object underneath it *even from Hamlet himself*.

The play provides an ironic and ominous 'answer of the real' to such an appraisal of Hamlet's behaviour, for he is not the only one that produces an antic impression. Conspicuously yet so far harmlessly, Polonius gets caught up in his own devices *twice* during the Act. The first time it happens takes place right at the beginning of Act 2; that is, textually, right after Hamlet has promised to put the antic disposition on at the end of Act 1 scene 5. Polonius is so impressed by the subtlety of his own plan to spy on Laertes in Paris that when he finally comes to explaining the purpose of it all, he *cannot* remember what it was:

Polonius Marry, sir, here's my drift;
And I believe, it is a fetch of wit:
You laying these slight sullies on my son,
As 'twere a thing a little soil'd i' the working, Mark you,
Your party in converse, him you would sound,
Having ever seen in the prenominate crimes
The youth you breathe of guilty, be assured
He closes with you in this consequence;
'Good sir', or so, or 'friend', or 'gentleman',

According to the phrase or the addition
Of man and country.

Reynaldo Very good, my lord.

Polonius And then, sir, does he this – he does – *what was I
about to say? By the mass, I was about to say
something: where did I leave?*

(2.1.44-58, italics added)

The next time follows almost immediately when he is expostulating with Claudius and Gertrude on the matter of Hamlet's madness. The extraordinary convolution through which he goes in order to introduce his chief (yet far from conclusive) piece of evidence – Hamlet's brief letter to Ophelia – can be sampled from its final stage where the meaning of the evidence should already be clear, both to the presenter and the audience (which is far from the case):

Madam, I swear I use no art at all.
That he is mad, 'tis true: 'tis true 'tis pity;
And pity 'tis 'tis true: a foolish figure;
But farewell it, for I will use no art.
Mad let us grant him, then: and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause:
Thus it remains, and the remainder thus. Perpend.
I have a daughter – have while she is mine –
Who, in her duty and obedience, mark,
Hath given me this: now gather, and surmise.
(2.2.107-19)

Polonius, the father of double blessings, 'precepts' and 'good news', can never stop inventing, especially when it comes to truth – even when it rather seems to be the matter of trust between him and his children. The compulsion to be right, the urge to catch the 'carp of truth', 'though it were hid indeed/ within the centre' (2.2.169-70) proves too strong, certainly stronger than its need. The spying scheme against Laertes is matched at

that moment by the earlier admonition to Ophelia in Act 1 scene 3 on the matter of Hamlet's favours ('think yourself a baby', 'you'll tender me a fool'). The matter of separation of truth from friends, relatives, and indeed reality makes Polonius a true 'Aristotelian' alter-ego of Hamlet: *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*¹¹³ can certainly be their motto, specifically for the second and third Act.

This curious affinity between them provides a glimpse of the dramatic necessity that underlies the unfolding events of the second Act which, with regard to what should have become the plot's main concern – revenge, appear puzzling. The Act opens, as we have seen, with Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo on how to catch the 'carp of truth' about Laertes' behaviour in Paris, which is quite unrelated to the plot's main concern. The fact that with Reynaldo Polonius is also sending Laertes some money ('Give him this money and these notes', 2.1.3) seems to suggest, as many critics pointed out, that a considerable amount of real time must have passed since the fateful night on the battlements. But as other critics no less pertinently point out, this pause is hardly emphasised in dramatic terms because Polonius and Reynaldo appear *right after* the end of the battlements scene.

Their conversation is almost interrupted by the agitated entrance of Ophelia which, indeed, draws the attention away from the question of time as such. Hamlet's haunting appearance in her closet, already discussed above with regard to the Ghost's impact, must also be considered in its own dramatic context. It comes right after Polonius' bumbling discourse on how to extract truth from behind the mirror of appearances and, although completely different in its method, shares its peculiar focus. The whole episode is one intense moment of observation where Hamlet is drawing

¹¹³ 'Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend'.

Ophelia's face, extracting its essence, completely absorbed in the sight to the very last instant, walking out with his head turned backwards. Because we already know after Act 1 scene 3 that there has been a relationship between them and, moreover, that this relationship is threatened, this moment in itself is not surprising. What captivates in the sheer and quite graphic intensity of the spectacle (located offstage like the most intense moments of classical drama) is its excessive nature with regard to its object. Indeed, Ophelia has every reason to expect a display of hurt feelings from Hamlet, but not *a ghost loosed from hell*; and yet it is, as Gertrude puts it later on, 'all' that she sees. Perhaps, it is indeed all that Hamlet wants her to see at that moment. The critics have certainly often pointed out that it is Gertrude who is the true cause and addressee of this display. However, it is plainly obvious that *neither* Hamlet *nor* Ophelia can appreciate the fact. They are too absorbed in the mutual reality of the moment whose deeper sense can only be gleaned from an informed, leisurely distance.

Unfortunately for himself and his daughter, Polonius is convinced that he is informed enough to translate the meaning of this visitation. If Hamlet intended it as the first dissimulating step in his grand revenge scheme, it appears that he could not have chosen a better moment, method, and target. Polonius' appetite for discovery and penchant for persuasion ensure that Claudius and Gertrude, who, as it turns out, have indeed been wondering about the cause of Hamlet's changed behaviour, immediately receive the above mentioned report about the prince's love-stricken state. It is most remarkable that Polonius says nothing about Hamlet's closet visitation, his holding Ophelia by the wrist and his intent forlorn perusal of her face. This should have been so much more effective than the brief profession of the letter which is too conscious of its awkwardness and all but abjures itself. This seems to be another example of Polonius'

thinking too precisely on the event, as Hamlet puts it later about himself. No wonder the royal couple is not convinced. Nevertheless, they have no choice but to be 'hooked' by Polonius' report, partly because it does present real evidence and no less importantly because their *own* self-consciousness of their 'o'erhasty marriage' makes them *really* want Polonius' report to be true – and so they decide to 'try' it 'further. Thus, even before the nunnery scene, Ophelia seems to play the decoy for Hamlet, *through Polonius' blindness*, against the royal couple.

While they and Polonius are still in conference over the matter, Hamlet may have, accidentally or not, overheard them in his disputed entrance at 2.2.162 exactly when Polonius offers to 'loose' his daughter to Hamlet in order to test his love-madness theory. After this, Hamlet enters almost right away, 'madly attired' (according to the Q1), lets Polonius 'board him', and engages with him in an 'antic' conversation in which he takes him for a 'fishmonger'. Just as his appearance in the closet presents itself to Ophelia's blind eyes, so the bulk of his ominous, offensive quipping falls on Polonius' deaf ears. The only thing that Polonius is able to verify is indeed what he is already convinced of: that Hamlet has an interest in his daughter. However, the nature of this interest, contained in the 'art' of Hamlet's replies and rooted in his hidden knowledge (perhaps of Polonius' conference with Claudius and certainly that of Gertrude's 'frailty'), almost completely eludes him. He does appreciate the presence of a 'method' and 'pregnancy' in Hamlet's baffling responses, but he ascribes it totally to the 'extremity of love' – such, indeed, as he himself 'very nearly suffered' from: 'Take this from this if this be otherwise'! (2.2.204, 167). This self-assurance makes Polonius take another unwitting step towards the arras in Gertrude's closet.

The entertaining contrast between the rich intensity of Hamlet's two appearances and Polonius' unwittingly ridiculous attempts to interpret them ensures that at their given moment no questions arise as to their purpose. But this does not mean that this purpose becomes obvious as the respective scenes progress. Their elaboration is quite overwhelming both in terms of their content and the dramatic space they take up. Thus if Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia and Polonius at this stage was a careful preparation for an important move against Claudius, he is interrupted by the arrival of his 'excellent good friends', which he could not have foreseen. During their brief conversation, he certainly proves a much shrewder interpreter than Polonius: he can almost immediately see through the inadequate 'colour' with which their modesties are trying to cover the awkward purpose of their mission. So he learns that it is not just Polonius that is watching him at his own and/or Claudius' initiative. Claudius has certainly made his provisions to spy on the prince even before Hamlet makes his appearance in Ophelia's closet. Polonius' report on Hamlet's extreme love for his daughter seems to provide an indirect response to this move – yet, for the above mentioned reasons, Claudius cannot remain fully convinced and wants further proof. Thus if Hamlet wanted to bind Claudius' and everyone else's attention to himself as an antic lover, he certainly achieved it.

However, he does not have a chance to take stock of his achievements. Before he manages to lose all interest in the two turncoats, get rid of their presence, break into a soliloquy (as he does in Act 1 scene 2) and perhaps devise a further step (move in for the kill?), they announce another arrival which diverts his attention: the tragedians of the city. Thus room for a new entertaining contrast, that between Hamlet's treatment of his 'sponge' friends and of the actors, is created.

As is the case with Ophelia and Polonius earlier, this contrast resonates with Hamlet's hidden knowledge of the Ghost. However, this time the ghostly colouring is represented in full view (as opposed to the reported episode in the closet) and also in front of *Polonius* (rather than Ophelia) and certainly his two even less informed friends. That is, characteristically, the play does not simply make a reference to its earlier dramatic situation but almost physically juxtaposes three, in this case consecutive, segments of its action, united by the common leitmotif. This leitmotif is certainly the spectacle of Hamlet as an open secret, first manifested in Ophelia's closet, then with Polonius in the 'fishmonger' dialogue, then with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and finally in the declamatory exchange with one of the players. The fourth and last segment of this repetition is in itself a doubling because there Hamlet gets to experience his own spectacle as a member of baffled audience – or rather, by the end of the Pyrrhus-Priam-Hecuba exchange he finally gets a glimpse of what he *has* and, most significantly, what he *has not* been doing throughout the Act. This becomes possible certainly because here he is ostensibly engaged in playing someone who is formally unconnected with Elsinore and reality as such, and thus he can consciously step out of himself and make a comparison, while in his previous appearances he was immersed in his own act of the moment. Also, more specifically, Hamlet can make the comparison because the figure he is concentrating upon, 'the rugged Pyrrhus', stands in almost a perfect opposition to his previous performances in this Act with regard to his hidden agenda. In his distraught appearances in Ophelia's closet, in front of Polonius, and with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is essentially playing a *victim*: a Ghost-like figure ('And with a look so piteous in purport/As if he had been loosed out of hell/To speak of horrors'), an eccentric intellectual ('madly attired, reading on a book') enduring essentially the same

contemplation of 'frailty' in women ('good kissing carrion'), senility in old men ('tedious old fools!'), perfidy in young (friends), degeneration of the whole world ('most excellent canopy') into 'a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours' and thus the man in general into a 'quintessence of dust'. In other words, Hamlet is there inspired by the Ghost itself – and, perhaps, even by Yorick – to play 'the antic' at the court of 'Death' within the 'hollow crown' of Denmark, (characteristically, anticipating the grave-scene).

By contrast, the figure of Pyrrhus makes Hamlet perform a complex turn to the other side of death, that of the grim reaper, and thus the other side of the founding crime, that is the murder and *murderer* – and certainly not any murder but the murder of a king and father. Simultaneously, Pyrrhus' act does not only represent this kind of murder as such but, crucially, a *vengeance* for such a murder. The specific background to Pyrrhus' fury in the declaimed passage is the treacherous murder of his father Achilles by the poisoned bolt of Priam's son Paris (directed by Apollo) and the fact that Pyrrhus cannot directly avenge this death, for Paris is already killed by Philoctetes. Thus the vengeful rage with which Pyrrhus is driving at the old Priam is displaced, although it still presumably makes sense within the larger context of the war (if Helen's and various gods' involvement is not scrutinized). The displacement is also most peculiar, if we take into account the fact that Priam and Hecuba themselves tried to get rid of Paris after he was born (in the characteristically Oedipal manner by sending him to Mount Ida) after they received the prophecy that his birth will bring the downfall of Troy.

However, all these spiraling circles of treachery and vengeance are certainly not elaborated in the given moment of the exchange. Instead, they are extraordinarily condensed in

The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couched in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smear'd
With heraldry more dismal; head to foot
Now is he total gules; horridly trick'd
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Baked and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and damned light
To their lord's murder: roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks.

(2.2.306-318)

Similarly, the hidden suffering of the Ghost was, in a sense, evinced by Hamlet's earlier closet appearance. However, Pyrrhus' exterior, unlike Hamlet's, has no air of hidden knowledge; on the contrary, it is as black as his purpose, as the dark womb of the 'ominous horse' from which he emerges, and as the gore with which he covers the streets of Troy.

Nevertheless, the relationship to the play's hidden knowledge here is most intimate because in the context of the scene Pyrrhus emerges virtually from *Hamlet's* head; the uncanny aspect of this emergence is reinforced by the quite possible fact that at the moment of declamation Hamlet is still in his Ghostly, 'mad' attire (if we stick to the stage directions in Q1) that in the context of the speech must acquire an unexpectedly sinister quality.

The already mentioned peculiar play between contingency and necessity at this juncture merits further attention. In the so far observed progress of the Act, Hamlet has seemed doubly distracted: on the one hand because he, presumably, *wanted* to seem distracted and on the other, because whatever concrete purpose this spectacle was supposed to pursue seemed always distracted by unexpected appearances – e.g.,

Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and, most remarkably, the actors (whose arrival in itself is supposed to signal distraction – ‘delights’ and ‘pleasures’, as Claudius calls them). However, this last instance, which literally juxtaposes all the previous key episodes – Hamlet, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watching an unexpectedly arrived actor perform an apparently disconnected fragment – helps bring out, with extraordinary subtlety, the peculiar relationship between action and purpose in them. First of all, it certainly brings out into the open, for the first time since the end of the last Act – and it is almost a whole Act later – the purpose that was *supposed* to be hidden within Hamlet’s antic disposition. Instead of having the courtiers wonder at Amleth’s dexterity in fashioning little crooks, Shakespeare makes them wonder at a whole speech about extreme vengeance and destruction, performed with extreme passion/empathy. To be more precise in this comparison, Saxo’s Amleth does *consciously* prepare the crooks and thus makes the court wonder at his dexterity, while in the latter case the display *cannot* be wholly ascribed to Hamlet’s intention, and it does not possess the same functionality. This, in itself, cannot be ascribed to the necessity to maintain secrecy about revenge, for Hamlet does initiate the Pyrrhus episode insofar as the speech in question emerges in his memory as soon as he hears about the actors. However, it is not entirely up to Hamlet to initiate this association and declamation because it is due to the almost pure accident of the actors’ arrival – and not just any actors from the city, but namely those whom he has seen perform this particular Pyrrhus speech before. The accident is ‘almost pure’ because the ‘war of the theatres’, which brings the actors to the court and which Hamlet is absorbingly discussing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, becomes curiously linked by the prince to Claudius’ accession: the lowly thirst for sensationalism which is fueling this war does not appear to him

very strange; for mine uncle is king of
Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while
my father lived, give twenty, forty, fifty, an
hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little.
(2.2.268)

Nevertheless, if traveling for the actors is here inevitable, the precise moment of their arrival is pure coincidence. And thus it is by a *coincidence* that Hamlet, in the only soliloquy in this Act occurring at its very end after the declamation episode, seems to remember about his obligation. Hamlet starts this soliloquy most significantly with 'Now I am alone'. This suggests that he did feel the lack of asides and soliloquies in this Act. This fact acutely problematises the question of time/delay which began to lurk from the very start of the Act. On the one hand, there are numerous objective indications of the considerable amount of time that has passed since the moment in the last scene of Act 1. In addition to the already observed implications of elapsed time in the matter of Polonius' preoccupation with Laertes and the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there is yet another arrival – that of Claudius' ambassadors from Norway – which adds to these implications. Furthermore, there are Claudius' and Gertrude's references to the persistence of the change in Hamlet's behaviour which is making them increasingly worried (and certainly Ophelia's later statement that it is now 'twice two months' since the death of King Hamlet, instead of the 'two months' in the first Act). All this has certainly made the many generations of critics wonder what on earth Hamlet has been waiting for all this time.

This judicious and detached perception of time largely disregards the dramatic reality of the Act, signaled by the 'Now I am alone' and corroborated by the observed scenes. As it was already emphasised by Waldock, for example, what we see on stage in

the second Act is far from 'a mere colourless lapse of days'¹¹⁴. Hamlet's oath to the Ghost at the end of the first Act is juxtaposed very closely in terms of dramatic time with the emergence of Ophelia's rejection; the affective nature of his appearance in the closet in this context suggests more emotion than calculation. Hardly does he manage to emerge from the closet, when Polonius boards him 'presently' after Claudius hurriedly dismisses the ambassadors from Norway in order to let Polonius 'try further' the issue that is troubling them both most, and Polonius is followed immediately by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the actors. Thus the impression is indeed that Hamlet has hardly had the time to collect his wits and devise a plan of action since the Ghost's visitation.

Yet the initiative in this dramatically objective 'delay' is peculiarly divided. Hamlet is not simply being beset by the endless string of visitors whom he impatiently dismisses – he is himself deeply engaged in the scenes, even when he apparently should not enjoy it, as in the case of the 'fishmonger' dialogue with Polonius. Thus, on the one hand, by the end of the act he suddenly realises the amount of time that has passed and on the other, up till that very moment, he has been so deeply engaged in the reality of a given moment that he *must have not noticed* the time's passage. It is true that Hamlet and others refer to his persistent brooding and apathy, but the objective observation matters much less here than the embedding of the subject in the movement of dramatic time itself.

This is not to suggest that Hamlet reveals himself as someone whose attention is constantly and completely led astray by a random concern of the moment. On the contrary, his very susceptibility to being led astray is deeply linked to his constant awareness of his obligation. His antic disposition – and thus the focus on his secret

¹¹⁴ *Hamlet: A Study in Critical Method* (Cambridge 1931, p.81)

knowledge and task – suggestively persists in each of his scenes *in spite* of the increasing randomness of the events that prompt them (Ophelia's unexpected rejection, Polonius' tiresome attention, unexpected arrival of the old friends and the actors after them). Indeed, his concentration on his sworn task appears to increase with this randomness, culminating in the Pyrrhus passage which, while arising from perhaps the most contingent event in the Act, proves to be the closest to Hamlet's central concern. In terms of his later soliloquy, introducing his departure for England, Hamlet can indeed see how '*all* occasions do inform against' him; he is 'thinking too precisely on the event' (4.4.37, 46). He is overwhelmed by the myriad ways in which 'the event' returns to haunt him virtually every single moment and thus spills over to others in his 'pregnant' replies.

The moment of Pyrrhus-Priam-Hecuba speech is by far the most overwhelming at this stage. This is not the least because for all his enthusiasm about this 'caviar to the general', for all the relish of anticipation, Hamlet, characteristically, must hardly be aware of the impact it is going to have on him afterwards (judging by his subsequent soliloquy). The thought of Pyrrhus, as perhaps the silent perusal of Ophelia in the closet scene, is an instant, short but distinct, of pure inspiration. However, it is certainly because of what this moment turns into that it acquires the status of a turning point.

The matter of Pyrrhus' virtual emergence from Hamlet's memory has already been noted. This emergence certainly underscores their affinity, which must unexpectedly transform Hamlet's 'mad' attire into quite an ominous suit (if the prince appears in his traditional black, the visual relevance is still there – 'black as his purpose' – with the twist of highlighting what Hamlet's mournfulness and moodiness must be transforming into). However, unlike Pyrrhus, Hamlet cannot anticipate the moment of

emergence. Thus the fact that Pyrrhus' emergence in the speech is literally nursed and delivered by premeditated deception ('lay *couched* in the ominous horse') which thus assumes a distinctly animate, almost intentional relationship to the deed; the '*tyrannous and damned* light' that the streets 'lend' to the figure in response to his indiscriminate slaughter; the fact that Pyrrhus is looking for the Troy's 'old sire' Priam and that Priam's body is associated with 'Mars' armour' which directly recalls the Ghost's appearance on the battlements¹¹⁵ – all these features combine to make Pyrrhus acquire the attributes of Claudius¹¹⁶. Hamlet's consciousness of this link is uncertain, although it is indirectly corroborated by his railing against his uncle in the immediately following soliloquy ('bloody, bawdy villain!/Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!' 2.2.414-15). The main discovery that Hamlet does make in his soliloquy, after facing the embodiment of his task, is that everything that he has done and, presumably, thought about in this Act *did not have a conscious purpose*. His enigmatic, 'pregnant', antic behaviour, which proved so elusive and bewildering to the court, was also such *for Hamlet himself*. If the players had not happened to arrive, it is perfectly imaginable that Hamlet, after sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern away, would have exclaimed like Polonius: By the mass, what was I about to do? This possibility is not only bitterly acknowledged by Hamlet in the soliloquy but is prefigured by the climactic pause in the very middle of Pyrrhus' speech, which in the context of the scene acquires a most haunting quality:

¹¹⁵ This identification is certainly echoed later by Hamlet in his closet scene with Gertrude where, preaching to her the difference between the portraits (and personas) of her two husbands, he describes his father's expression 'An eye like Mars, to threaten and command' (3.4.67).

¹¹⁶ The Ghost currently refers to the royal bed of Denmark as 'A *couch* for luxury and *damned* incest' and certainly all but directly links it to the murder of the King. The correspondence with Pyrrhus' ominous horse makes this link more suggestive.

But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
The unnerved father falls. Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear: for, lo! his sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seem'd i' the air to stick:
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.

But, as we often see, against some storm,
A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,
The bold winds speechless and the orb below
As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder
Doth rend the region, so, after Pyrrhus' pause,
Aroused vengeance sets him new a-work;
And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall
On Mars' armour forged for proof eterne
With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword
Now falls on Priam.

(2.2.326-345)

Apart from prefiguring Hamlet's realisation of the pause in his action, the passage certainly recalls the Ghost's message, the double crime done against the king. Thus in a very particular sense the Ghost's message, communicated as and by the permeable (as Marcellus testified) 'invulnerable air' itself permeates, 'like eager droppings into milk', the dramatic reality of the second Act and makes it quite sticky, vulnerable, and repugnant to action. This message is exercising its influence not only directly within Hamlet's mind. The fact of the Act is that although his antic behaviour remains an open secret, it nevertheless fills the atmosphere and minds of the court with its mystery, the 'method' that Polonius and others see lurking in it. This is particularly true of Claudius, the other Pyrrhus of the play, whom Hamlet's 'lunacy' does turn for the moment into a painted tyrant, making his sword stick in the air.

There is, surely, an apparent contrast between Hamlet's erratic behaviour and Claudius' purposefulness. He does concentrate on Hamlet all his attention and activity,

even at the expense of the important matter of Fortinbras who is, indeed, another variant of Pyrrhus, unable to challenge the vanquisher of his father directly but willing to try it with the successor: he has a *whole army* at his disposal which is about to enter Claudius' borders and which eventually *will* show up claiming the 'rights of memory'. However, Claudius seems completely satisfied by the assurances of Fortinbras' uncle and indeed convinced that this 'ominous horse' is indeed just a horse – surely forgetting that once Fortinbras manages to place his army on the other side of Denmark, there will be no uncle Norway to stop him at Claudius' request.

For the moment though, Claudius wishes to believe that Fortinbras is in check, so he can concentrate on the various means to find out what it is that his nephew is brooding on. The paradox of these activities is certainly that Claudius is almost sure from the start of the Act – even before the nunnery scene later on – that Hamlet's behaviour can hardly be motivated by love or mourning only. In other words, just like Hamlet in Act 2, Claudius is brooding on the possibility that Hamlet has either found out about the murder or suspects him. Given the later development of the situation, Claudius' behaviour here, while on the surface more reasonable, is almost as absurd as Hamlet's. More, because what is the point of Claudius' trying to discover what it is that Hamlet may be planning under the guise of his lunacy if this *something* may be Claudius' own death? The whole point of his role as the secret villain ought to be *anticipation* rather than discovery. Instead of behaving like one, whose knowledge of his primal crime ('O heavy burden!') outweighs anyone's in the play and anything he thinks he may ever learn, he behaves like Polonius, which places him in a weak position at the moment. If Hamlet, like Amleth, was indeed using his antic disposition to mystify Ophelia, and through her Polonius, and through Polonius Claudius into a dazzled

inaction so that after leading them along the false 'love' trail he could suddenly strike him like a toreador, he could have certainly accomplished it now and would have thus presented quite a faithful and more sophisticated elaboration on the original revenge plot.

As it is, Shakespeare's elaboration here is even more remarkable because Hamlet manages to achieve larger results *without* knowing exactly what he is doing. Returning to the situation at hand, it is worth pursuing the comparison between him and Claudius in the context of Pyrrhus' speech a little further because at this stage Claudius *does know* why he has not had Hamlet killed yet, while Hamlet does not know why he has been delaying. More precisely, he has not yet even become aware of his delay. It is the hyperbolic imagery of the passage that gives him the necessary epiphanic jolt: in the characteristically metatheatrical manner of the play, the fierce, remorseless fall of Pyrrhus' sword on Priam's body arrests Hamlet's mind on his own state epitomised by the immediately preceding, sublime instant of that sword stuck in the air made thick by the 'hideous crash' of 'senseless Illium'. Although Hamlet clutches onto the figure of Hecuba in the immediately following soliloquy, he does it certainly because of what the actor *did* to represent her extreme abjection. Thus the matter of the unexpectedly discovered, profoundly unsettling and 'pregnant' pause in his action is certainly Hamlet's central concern:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,

Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
 And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
 Upon whose property and most dear life
 A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
 Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
 Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
 Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
 As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
 Ha!
 'Swounds, I should take it for it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this
 I should have fatted all the region kites
 With this slave's offal: bloody, bawdy villain!
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
 O, vengeance!

(2.2.391-416)

Thus Hamlet, virtually unexpectedly, finds himself stuck in the air at the end of Act 2, madly looking for answers. 'About my brain!' he says and finds one immediately:

I have heard
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play
 Have by the very cunning of the scene
 Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;
 I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 May be the devil: and the devil hath power
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds
 More relative than this: the play 's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

(2.2.433-4)

Critics speculated that this – 'The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil' – is what stimulated Hamlet's delay *consciously* from the start; that this is what drove his antic disposition. However, the context of the soliloquy and the whole Act contradicts this. It

is impossible to cry 'bloody, bawdy villain!/Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! O, vengeance!' first and then doubt the truth of the Ghost's word consciously *at the same time*. The explanation for this *coup de main* must be that Hamlet simply cannot forgive himself the embarrassing discovery of such an inexplicable lapse in his behaviour, especially given his *lack of doubt* as to the Ghost's truth in all the scenes observed so far and in the soliloquy itself. Such a 'noble mind', the foremost 'courtier', 'soldier', 'scholar', 'expectancy and rose of the fair state' and more particularly of the father and 'king upon whose property and *most dear* life/A damned defeat was made' – and such a lapse! There simply *must be a reason for it!* 'If only philosophy could find it out'!

Hamlet's very compulsion to find a plausible excuse for this baffling delay is the key indication that he certainly believes the Ghost's message, the guilt which dominates the larger part of the soliloquy is the strong and unmistakable indication of it. It is at this crucial point that Hamlet gets entangled in the logic of guilt which motivated Claudius from his very first speech and most particularly in his search for the truth of Hamlet's inner mind. According to this logic, Claudius cannot simply kill the most probable avenger who, evidently just like his father, stands now in the way of his enjoyment – the weight of the original crime presses him to make this new killing *justified*. And Hamlet cannot kill Claudius now right away because...he *did not* kill Claudius right away (after the Ghost's visitation). He is not sure exactly how this happened ('Am I a coward?') but this is as bad as being Claudius, or a 'coward', a 'drab', a 'scullion', or Gertrude dexterously posting to incestuous sheets with funeral tears still galling her eyes. Thus what Hamlet wants to justify at this point is not the killing itself, as he overtly professes, but the *lapse*, the unexpectedly discovered 'vicious mole' in his 'nature' which turned

his antic disposition, his elaborate secret mindfulness of the Ghost's command, into 'bestial oblivion' (as he puts it later on). The Freud-Jones classic psychoanalytic reading of the play insists that this oblivion has deep, 'internal', roots in Hamlet's fundamental unconscious identification with his uncle's double deed, the jealous identification of the potential 'evil-doer' with the actual one (E. Jones 88). According to this reading, the plot simply reveals this unconscious identification and its underlying fantasy enough to subject Hamlet to attacks of the repression-induced guilt and thus derail his ability to act. Erlich argued in his later revision of this reading that this does not make sense in psychoanalysis' own terms because if repression is punishing Hamlet with guilt for recognising the image of his desire in Claudius' deed,

why not mitigate that guilt by killing Claudius? This would make the identification with Claudius a successful defense mechanism, in that the conflict between wish and inhibition would be resolved in the outer world without damage to the self. Claudius would bear the brunt of Hamlet's problems. (21)

A more logical reinforcement of the Freud-Jones original psychoanalytic point, offered by Fineman¹¹⁷, is exactly that killing Claudius now that he has already accomplished the double crime would simply make Hamlet *repeat* it. Hence it appears that Freud's original opinion that

the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish ('Interpretation', 367)

still holds true in psychoanalytic terms. However, as Freud himself acknowledged, his reading of *Hamlet* never presumed to provide the ultimately exhaustive answer (even if Freud was only being polite) to the play's crux nor to base this answer on a detailed

¹¹⁷ 'Fratricide and Cuckoldry' in *Representing Shakespeare: new psychoanalytic essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn, Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980.

reading. What becomes obvious from the close reading of the play is that, although Freud's main emphasis on the peculiar identification between Hamlet and Claudius remains relevant, the dramatic form of this identification in the play itself is different from the inevitably more schematic notion of the plot which underlies his psychoanalytic discussion. In particular, in terms of the above analysis of the second Act which bears crucial relation to the question of transition from knowledge to action, it is clear that rather than being unable to kill Claudius because of a deep identification with his deed Hamlet gets caught up in this identification because of the sudden realisation of his inaction. The 'loathing' of the uncle at this moment is not 'replaced' with 'self-reproaches'; rather, in the above discussed soliloquy, they painfully clash. However painful this realisation of inaction is for Hamlet at this moment, it is remarkable that he does not simply give in to the guilty identification and let his purposefulness disintegrate into the '*specific aboulia*' (E. Jones 52), but he virtually meets this diagnosis head-on and perceives it as an enigma which he must solve. Like Oedipus with the number of Laius' killers, he may be clutching onto straws: 'The spirit that I have seen/ *May* be the devil', 'I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play...proclaimed their malefactions', but these are the straws that not only bespeak Hamlet's *aboulia* but help him confront it. Claudius here is much more neurotic because he does not have any rational reason for spying on Hamlet and thus sparing him for the moment. His tactic is perfectly in line with the general perversity of his enjoyment, 'yet so far hath discretion fought with nature', discussed above: he publicly presents his marriage to Gertrude (and thus the fratricide) as an act of 'moderation' between nature and discretion. Hamlet, on the other hand, does have the ambivalent support of the Ghost on the side of his neurosis: due to the extraordinary nature of this figure, Hamlet is indeed placed in

between *all* certainties. The Freud-Jones interpretation of the play assumes the *non-*uncanny nature of the Ghost ('The Uncanny', 351) and the general irrelevance of the Ghost as figure to Hamlet's convictions concerning his uncle (E. Jones, 54) thus concentrating exclusively on the Oedipus complex. However, all the dramatic evidence certainly points to the extraordinary nature of the Ghost whose emergence perfectly reverses Freud's own treatment of the return of the dead *outside* fiction:

All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits, and have made any such appearances dependent on improbable and remote conditions; their emotional attitude towards their dead, moreover, once a highly ambiguous and ambivalent one, has been toned down in the higher strata of the mind into an unambiguous feeling of piety. ('The Uncanny', 365)

In the context of the play, the Ghost is, as was already observed, a thoroughly unexpected, most strange appearance, taking place in spite of the witnesses' beliefs, and although the feelings it inspires are far from unambiguous piety, the primitive beliefs manage to take hold of the witnesses – especially, the educated ones – only 'in part', as Horatio puts it. Hamlet's peculiar urging of secrecy afterwards does nothing to reduce the uncanniness/ambiguity of the apparition. The epiphanic ending of the second Act ultimately repeats for Hamlet the encounter with the Ghost: his inaction seems to him as unexpected and inexplicable, as fraught with meaning. Garber and Hirschfield who, in their respective ways, single out the compulsive repetitiveness in the pattern of Hamlet's behaviour, certainly point out what at the end of Act 2 seems to become the crucial feature of Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost and its message. However, it is important to emphasise that together with setting the traumatic, compulsive pattern for the rest of the action, this turning point in the play also lays down a paradoxical foundation for the redemptive possibility precisely through revealing Hamlet's

thoroughly conscientious and thus thoroughly compromised, erratic, attitude to revenge
(counterbalanced by Claudius' guilty villainy).

3.6 Up, Sword

Conscience, indeed, becomes the leitmotif of Act 3 dominated by the intersecting theatricality of *The Mousetrap* and Claudius-Polonius' scheme of spying on Hamlet.

After the baffling realisation that he has not considered the matter of the Ghost, revenge, and his uncle carefully enough, Hamlet is formally giving himself and Claudius another chance. In reality, as is obvious in the last soliloquy of Act 2, his mind is firmly set against Claudius, and the secret theatrical investigation that he is about to subject him to is certainly far from impartial. What is this if not Oedipal procrastination and/or traumatic compulsion leading Hamlet to dwell on the primal scene, which in this case is a composite of the original Sin ('incestuous sheets'), the original murder (fratricide), and adultery? psychoanalysts will ask. What is this, in other words, if not a compulsive return to the enigma underlying all of these acts, as Hirschfield argues?

Hamlet is grappling virtually with these same questions in the already partly discussed 'To be or not to be' soliloquy with which he enters Act 3. He is not that far from giving himself a straightforward psychoanalytic diagnosis, having taken stock of the problem in his progress so far and made up his mind about the general nature of delay in 'enterprises of great pith and moment' (3.1.96). However, as was already noted, he is distancing himself from those who simply 'grunt and sweat under' this 'weary life', unable to face the uncertain 'dread' of 'something after death' (3.1.87, 88). The relation between this 'dread' and 'conscience' that daunts 'us all' into inaction is not straightforward: the two are related but not identical, because taking 'arms against a sea of troubles', which is much closer to an 'enterprise of great pith and moment', is not the

same as ending one's life with a 'bare bodkin' – a possibly dignified but nevertheless defeatist escape for those overwhelmingly oppressed by

the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes
(3.1.80-4)

Indeed, the very contrast between these two poles of human action is crucial for the appreciation of the difference in the nature of their absolute limit. In the latter case it is indeed the 'dread' – or, in Freud's technical terms, 'anxiety' – of something absolutely unknown, because indeed there is no framework of interaction in which this dread can be confronted with even a semblance of equality between the victim and the oppressor. This is hardly Hamlet's case. He has already faced an ambiguous but irrefutable image of this 'dread' and received a message commanding action in its name – that is, the name of his murdered father and king. It is true that it is Hamlet who bestows this name on the spirit but what matters is that the spirit responds and thus makes itself dependent on the verbal and most importantly moral mechanism of human communication. Thus, for Hamlet, the question of action now is not that of a simple escape from 'the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to', of walking 'out of the air' which has become too unbearable to live in, curbed by the unknown dread. Hamlet hardly ever considers suicide seriously ('O that the Everlasting had not fix'd his canon 'gainst self-slaughter' does not sound exactly suicidal). The question of action is here that of a 'great enterprise' which consists not in evading but in facing the terrifying enigma of the primal crime, in verifying its existence and living up to the terms of his obligation to its

victim, even to the letter¹¹⁸. He cannot let his consciousness either falter over this task or deter the action – he cannot allow another lapse. Thus the greatness of the enterprise is measured not so much by the necessity of murdering the current king but in first making the original crime resurface in his (and the queen's) conscience enough to disturb the equilibrium of their appearances, which also means the equilibrium of their consciences. From psychoanalytic point of view, this requirement is only a further step toward a more sophisticated procrastination and/or compulsive return to the traumatic scene; however, from the genre's point of view, this 'pathological' fixation is Hamlet's principal source of vindication, as it is the case with Shylock, Hieronimo, Titus, Angelo. Hamlet's uniqueness certainly is that he is not simply fixated on the letter of his revenge/punishment pledge; not even on eliminating the murderer in a specifically apposite way, based on the original offence. To reverse Angelo's credo in *Measure for Measure*¹¹⁹, Hamlet is fixated indeed on attacking the offence itself (and not only the 'actor') in the very conscience, the 'soul', of the offender. He does talk about it in terms of 'purgation' and 'physic' later on, describing himself as 'scourge and minister' at the same time¹²⁰. This certainly does not mean that he, like the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, is absolutely bent on forcing his subjects and transgressors into contrition and humility without having to punish anyone in reality (except through marriage). But the amount of pressure that Hamlet has already put on the consciences of his main targets

¹¹⁸ Certainly, this is quite like Oedipus' relation to the riddle of the oracle both in the background narrative and the play itself.

¹¹⁹ 'Mine were the very cipher of a function,
To fine the faults whose fine stands in record,
And let go by the actor.' (2.2.39-41)

¹²⁰ Which, as Prosser points out, is not a neutral hendiadys but an oxymoron because a scourge of God is normally punished by God with the very punishment that he metes, whereas a minister is the embodiment and agent of grace. Hamlet certainly tries to see himself as combining the two roles by the end of his closet scene with Gertrude.

and the amount that he is going to add in this Act proves indeed *almost* enough to convert both Gertrude and Claudius to genuine confession and penitence. And the fact that this does not happen is certainly not entirely Hamlet's fault.

Although Claudius is also fixated on Hamlet's conscience, he, on the contrary, is the one that is ready to bury it together with the 'actor' as soon as he discovers enough of it to confirm his suspicions. His method of discovery is largely the same – a kind of theatrical performance involving Polonius and Ophelia, which Hamlet himself provoked, inadvertently, by his distraught appearance in Ophelia's closet. Thus if Act 2 was dominated almost exclusively by Hamlet's own metatheatrical performances, in Act 3 the rest of the cast catches up, which turns the action into a veritable 'war of theatres'.

This war changes the temporal pattern of the action. If in Act 2 waiting was not prominent, in Act 3 Hamlet's first soliloquy ('To be') does not only happen because of the possible continuation of the epiphany the prince has had at the end of the previous Act but because he needs to wait until the start of the evening entertainment. Simultaneously, Claudius is waiting for Hamlet to appear in the lobby where he summoned him to, 'as 'twere by accident', 'affront Ophelia' (3.1.36-7). More fundamentally, Hamlet and Claudius become much more focused as antagonists; the alternation between pauses and acts in their action acquires a closer interrelated dramatic rhythm. Lacan's designation of this pattern as 'the hour of the Other'¹²¹ is suggestive to the extent that it acknowledges this peculiarity, but it does not do justice to the complex interplay between the subject and the Other specifically in this Act where each antagonist waits not only for the other to assume a certain position in time and space that

¹²¹ '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...Not for a moment does he think that his time has come...Whatever Hamlet may do, he will do it only at the hour of the Other' ('Desire', 18).

would be convenient for his action, but also for the moment of a particular relevance which will justify action in terms of *his own* particular agenda. The desire driving the antagonists is not, as Lacan insists, schematically and inscrutably phallic – it is largely interpretative. This is particularly true of both Hamlet and Claudius who, unlike his nephew, is increasingly concentrated not so much on the right moment but on the right method for his actions. This divergence between them is not perfect, however, which leads to the paradox of the prayer scene determining all the subsequent action and representing the major crux of the play.

It is prepared for by the very opening of the Act when Claudius enthusiastically accepts the invitation to attend the evening performance, commissioned by Hamlet, while also anxiously preparing to join Polonius in a ‘lawful espial’ on Hamlet, with Ophelia ‘sugaring’ them ‘o’er’. This moment is the first time in the play when Claudius verbally acknowledges his guilt (‘O heavy burden!’) in the short painful aside immediately preceding Hamlet’s entrance with the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy. The two certainly speak to each other not only because of the juxtaposition but because Claudius certainly anticipates Hamlet’s arrival, while Hamlet may not be aware that he is being watched, given the stage directions¹²². Claudius reveals here for the first time the inescapable haunting reality of his guilt on which he will elaborate in the prayer scene later in this Act. The gist of that elaboration represents the tipping of the balance between guilt and action in favour of the latter in Claudius’ behaviour. The moment of his personal spying on Hamlet at the beginning of the Act is the first step he takes towards action under the very influence of his guilt. This provides a perfect backdrop to

¹²² During his soliloquy Hamlet is already in the lobby where Ophelia is ‘reading on a book’; and yet he manages to stay immersed in his speech for quite some time (30 odd lines) before he notices her with quite a surprise (‘Soft you now!’).

Hamlet's own development in the same direction manifested in his soliloquy at the end of Act 2 and the shortly following 'To be or not to be'. Claudius is, par excellence, the man who not only dreads 'something after death' but is convinced exactly what he is going to face there: the heavenly judgment where he will be 'compell'd/ Even to the teeth and forehead of [his] faults/ To give in evidence' (3.3.68-7), as he puts it in the prayer scene. Therefore, he has every reason not only to bear the 'pangs' of guilt and 'grunt and sweat under a weary life' but to make sure that no one sends him to his judgment too soon. His motivation for great enterprises – more specifically, for arranging first for Hamlet's withdrawal to England after the nunnery scene and then his execution there after *Gonzago* – is indeed very high precisely because of his knowledge and conviction about his crime¹²³. By contrast, Hamlet's resolution to act cannot by definition be as strong because he does not have Claudius' knowledge of the crime. Hamlet has realised by now that he has seen 'something' – his mother's remarriage, the Ghost – and, as he is going to tell Ophelia shortly, these tormenting, enigmatic sights have made him 'mad' – that is, both enraged and 'unpregnant' of his 'cause'. By staging *Gonzago* Hamlet is trying to approximate Claudius' certainty on the matter of action. However, the unique irony of the two antagonists' respective trajectories in this Act is that while Hamlet is looking to get Claudius' resolve through confronting him with his crime, the effect of this confrontation is to throw Claudius back on his knees in the prayer scene and look for Hamlet's state of 'the new-born babe' whose knees are still capable of kneeling, mind of sending genuine prayers, and whose hands are still as 'white as snow'.

¹²³ Incidentally, he never explicitly accuses himself of incest or adultery in his soliloquies.

By that ironic moment, both adversaries have received all the confirmations they wanted of each other's inner secrets. Hamlet has managed to elicit from Claudius the primary reaction he was looking for (presumably, the 'wincing' of the 'galled jade' on the 'talk of poisoning'). Claudius is finally convinced that his nephew has not only suspected him but somehow found out about the crime and is planning revenge. With these observations in mind, both have decided on their next steps. The additional irony of Claudius' praying fit is that it comes not only after *The Mousetrap* but after he has already sealed the letters demanding Hamlet's execution in England and given them to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet, on the contrary, is understandably quite undivided after *The Mousetrap* and resolved in the blackness of his purpose, as he demonstrates in the short soliloquy that he utters on the way to Gertrude's closet and immediately before he chances upon Claudius in prayer:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

(3.2.277-81)

This moment seems quite a logical stage in the development of his aggression which has been steadily rising since his entrance in this Act with 'To be or not to be'. In the immediately following scene with Ophelia, Hamlet, in addition to the commonly noted increasing brutality of his manner, explicitly tells her (most probably, with the suspected eavesdroppers in mind) that 'those that are married already – all but one – shall live' (3.1.131). During *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet, again quite cruelly using Ophelia as a backdrop, acts as an aggressive chorus anxious to elicit the guilty reaction from Claudius

he is looking for so that, presumably, he could sweep to his revenge. Despite the psychoanalytic critics' emphasis on the repetition compulsion value of the play-within-the-play here, the main focus of the scene for Hamlet is indeed *Claudius*' and Gertrude's faces at least as much as, if not more than, the playlet's action. He emphatically interrupts the performance at the key moments in order to amplify its effect and certainly spurs it on impatiently in anticipation of Lucianus, the poisoner, whom he identifies with himself by first presenting the character to the already alarmed Claudius as 'nephew to the king'. He then continues forcefully whetting Claudius' anxiety by emphasising the play's potentially satirical edge¹²⁴:

'tis a knavish piece of work: but what o'that? your majesty and we that have free souls, it touches us not: let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.

(3.2.184)

Then he certainly goes on to urge the actor playing Lucianus with 'Pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come: "the croaking raven doth bellow for *revenge*"' (3.2.232, italics added). Finally, when Lucianus' 'poison' enters the ears of the sleeping player-king, Hamlet immediately comments at length: 'A poisons him i'th' garden for 's estate. His name's Gonzago: the story is extant and writ in choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife' (3.2.239-241). Apart from the quite relevant Oedipal slip here resulting from Hamlet's earlier identification of himself with Lucianus, this is indeed the crucial moment of his building up his vengefulness by getting the desired reaction from Claudius. Here the paradoxical difference between Hamlet and Amleth is sharply obvious: Hamlet wants to sweep to his revenge precisely

¹²⁴ Which is ironically very close to the use that the children's theatre companies would make of the play – the very example that Hamlet decries in his earlier discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

by making his plan more and more explicit to Claudius, rather than hiding it behind some incomprehensible preparations. Simultaneously, by making his knowledge of the crime more and more explicit, Hamlet prepares *himself* for the act of vengeance. Thus after all this pressure culminates in Claudius' apparently dazzled self-incriminating departure ('Give me some light: away!'), Hamlet's words about drinking hot blood and contemplating Nero's deeds are certainly quite believable. Surely, he goes on to profess that in the interview with his mother (to which he is summoned almost right after Claudius leaves *The Mousetrap* by Rosencrantz and then Polonius) he will 'speak daggers but use none'. Nevertheless, he says this precisely because the 'soul of Nero' is indeed knocking on the door of his 'firm bosom'.

However, this proves to be both more and less than real murderousness just as his *Mousetrap* delivers him not exactly the prey he has been looking for. In his 'Nero' soliloquy, as well as in his talk with Horatio immediately after the play scene, Hamlet is so carried away with his own performance during *The Mousetrap* and its apparent success that he is completely unprepared to stumble upon a *praying* Claudius – a praying devil who, in this case unwittingly, is sugaring over himself with 'devotion's visage/ And pious action'. When he struck upon the idea of making his revenge more accessible through catching the conscience of the king with a play, he never contemplated the possibility that by the same device he may make revenge even less accessible by turning the prey into a penitent victim:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do't.

[*He draws his sword*]

And so he goes to heaven;
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:
A villain kills my father; and for that,

I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
He took my father grossly, full of bread;
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No!

[*He sheathes his sword*]

Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hint:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

(3.3.80-103)

The patience of critics, and certainly psychoanalytic ones, with Hamlet's excuses at this point is often spent. His logic here has been deemed indefensible not only on psychoanalytic but also on the religious/moral grounds, albeit for different reasons. For the traditional and modern psychoanalysts, this moment is the supreme proof of Hamlet's inhibition preventing him from fulfilling his task *whatever* the excuse; and this excuse in particular – that there actually is a conceivable possibility of Claudius getting to heaven after what Hamlet has just confirmed about him – is perhaps the most ridiculous. It is almost a perfect equivalent of the ambiguous premise in his soliloquy at the end of Act 2: Claudius is a villain, but I doubt the Ghost's truth. The critics certainly feel that Shakespeare himself supports their insight precisely because he shows Claudius in the same scene woefully failing at prayer. The religiously oriented critics (such as Bowers and Prosser) sincerely abhor this moment for the reason that Hamlet displays a

damnable lack of mercy by wanting to punish not only the body but the soul of the offender. They consider this moment in the play indeed to be the nadir of Hamlet's descent into the devilish snare laid out for him by the demonic Ghost. The almost immediately following murder of Polonius and his increasingly brutal treatment of Ophelia are only the corresponding steps in this moral degradation. Those who, like Hirschfield, attempt to integrate religion and psychoanalysis certainly emphasise the inextricable link between Hamlet's trajectory and the 'symptomatic' compulsion to return to, 'despite the effort to overcome', the original traumatic double scenes of the Fall ('the incestuous pleasure of his bed') and the original fratricide (Hirschfield 440).

All these readings are certainly relevant to the dramatic moment at hand, especially within their individual perspectives. However, in its own dramatic context, especially in relation to the preceding Act, this moment represents a continuation of the specific ambivalence in Hamlet's character already observed there: on the one hand an extreme conscientiousness regarding his task and on the other a complete absorption in a given situation which derails his straightforward progress towards it. At the point of Claudius' prayer scene this ambivalence unwittingly reaches and passes the point of no return. This is where Hamlet for the first time seriously considers murder – according to the Q2 stage directions, after the words 'And now I'll do it' '*He draws his sword*'. The various specialist interpretations here almost help to obscure the basic but also fundamental revelation of this speech: Hamlet is not a conscious murderer, despite the apparent contradiction of what is going to follow. He cannot think like one, particularly in Shakespeare, at this moment. A perfect comparison for his contemplation of Claudius in prayer is, for example, Richard's contemplation of his plot to murder his brother Clarence:

Go, tread the path that thou shalt ne'er return.
Simple, plain Clarence! I do love thee so
That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven,
If heaven will take the present at our hands.

(The Tragedy of Richard the Third, 1.1.123-6)

The difference between the two characters cannot be more pronounced: Richard is certainly not interested in Clarence's soul because the state of his own soul as a killer, like that of Claudius, precludes such interest. What matters is that the soul of the opponent does not linger in *this* world longer than is necessary for their respective agendas which they need to fulfil while they are still alive. Hamlet, on the contrary, at the moment of Claudius' prayer still lives in the world of infinite possibility. As he puts it to Ophelia only an hour or so before,

I could accuse me of such things that it
were better my mother had not borne me: I am very
proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at
my beck than I have thoughts to put them in,
imagination to give them shape, or time to act them
in.(3.1.125-6)

This may sound like an empty boast uttered out of his tortured self-defense in the face of Ophelia's little lie and infidelity ('Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind'). But this grandiose opinion of himself and his powers, this princely magnanimity, certainly is a real feature of Hamlet. After *The Mousetrap*, he lingers on with Horatio, praising his own aptitude for theatre business, relishing Claudius' wounded retreat, even again making fun of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then Polonius – without realising that at this very minute Claudius can already be finalising his plan to eliminate Hamlet (which he indeed is doing at the moment) and that he might not have enough time even to see the king again, let alone to consider how to go about the revenge itself, before someone is going to make an attempt at his life. He does not stop to think that the

invitation to visit Gertrude's chamber may already be a trap. And he certainly does not stop to consider whether his stumbling upon Claudius in prayer, who is unarmed and oblivious of anyone's presence, may be his only chance. Instead, he thinks that there will be other, more appropriate moments like 'When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,/Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;/At gaming, swearing, or about some act/That has no relish of salvation in't'. Surely, Hamlet quickly envisages these moments but again, crucially, makes *no provisions* to secure that he will have access and means to execute his revenge intention when these moments arise. By contrast, Claudius, as was already noted, goes to prayer only *after* he has made his provisions about Hamlet, so, in a sense, he can indeed be praying peacefully now: he knows that his nephew will soon be on his way to England and death (and Richard certainly knows that Clarence is secured in the Tower).

Instead of making similar provisions, Hamlet, when he stumbles over Claudius, is focused on the meaning of the obligation to his father which indeed seems to preclude that he takes the offender 'in the purging of his soul,/When he is fit and season'd for his passage' – in other words, in the very state which Claudius' act deprived his father of by his surreptitious crime. Despite what the critics have said about this excuse, it makes perfect sense within the limits of Hamlet's speech. Greenblatt is certainly right to single out this moment in *Hamlet in Purgatory* as hinting at a paradoxically true example of the remembrance of the father in the given circumstances (221), as opposed to the bloody and rash deeds, by Hamlet, Fortinbras, and Laertes, which follow one after the other in the later half of the play.

Nevertheless, Hamlet's sparing Claudius in the prayer scene cannot be simply explained in these terms. It does indeed constitute, as suggested above, the basis of

Hamlet's human appeal because he does seem to recognise the potency and sacral nature of guilt, penitence, and prayer by shying away from stabbing an unarmed, kneeling man in the back. While Hamlet is talking to himself behind Claudius' back, he does give him, inadvertently, a real chance at purging his soul – that is, at least at starting this process by 'assuming virtue' as he puts it later to Gertrude. However, the above noted irony of the text here is certainly that, after Hamlet finishes his speech on the decision to 'prolong' Claudius' 'sickly days', the latter confesses to himself (and the audience) that he *cannot* pray. This is an extraordinarily subtle challenge to Hamlet himself who since the end of Act 2 has been energetically trying to convince himself of Claudius' guilt. At that moment he did not want to take the Ghost's word at face value, did not want to listen to his own intuition and general disgust that he felt towards his uncle. He decided to put the appearances to the test using *The Mousetrap*, during which, as we saw, he *convinced* himself more than he got an irrefutable proof of Claudius' guilt. And now in the prayer scene he must still be convinced about the effect of his play on his uncle: he takes what he sees for the inner truth that he has been looking for. He is certainly not very far from it at all, but being a conscientious perfectionist in what concerns the meaning of his revenge, he paradoxically does not really pursue the matter of the contrast between appearances and inner truth in his object. He does not stay beside Claudius and *listen* to what Claudius must be muttering to himself. Being such a shrewd observer of the people around him, Hamlet reveals himself, especially in this Act, to be peculiarly incapable of empathy: he takes the posture of the praying man to be self-explanatory, he equates the desire and ability to pray, without pausing to imagine what it would be like trying to pray if he were Claudius (which certainly introduces a serious modification to the identification thesis of the psychoanalysts) – while he does stop to

speculate that Claudius' soul will definitely go to heaven simply because he is praying. Moreover, Hamlet certainly himself acknowledges in the same speech that the destiny of souls after death cannot really be known, even in spite of circumstantial evidence he has from the Ghost. All this seems to add up to the impression that Hamlet is acting out of well-meant convictions – remembrance of his father plus the desire not to be taken in by the possible devil's provocations – but that he has not really considered his situation and his steps carefully enough. Precisely because of the strength of these convictions, the absorption in a given moment, the amount of ad hoc reflection that he is always engaged in, he does not have the time to do it.

The climactic confirmation of it in this Act (and the whole play) is certainly the murder of Polonius which follows almost immediately after the prayer scene. The first question that is suggested by the comparison of these two episodes is not too far from Gertrude's 'O me! what hast thou done?' (3.4.34). Indeed, if Hamlet was so conscientious about making sure that Claudius' soul went to Hell, in conjunction with the implicit meaning of the Ghost's command, why did not he draw the arras away and make *sure* that the man behind it is 'the king'? The question, of course, may seem irrelevant, but then he does virtually answer it in response to Gertrude '*Nay, I know not. Is it the king?*' (3.4.33, emphasis added). Indeed, he does *not* know whom he has killed. He *might* have been sure about it just as he became sure of Claudius' genuine praying a moment ago. He was certainly ready to do it, but 'readiness', contrary to what he says later on in Act 5, is far from 'all' in a murderer's business. It is more impossible than not to imagine Claudius getting carried away to the point of mistaking the hour in the orchard and poisoning a gardener instead of his brother. Thus what Hamlet possibly wrote or selected from the actual *Murder of Gonzago* to include in the role of his player-

king – ‘Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own’ (3.2.161) – is catching up with him. And Hamlet’s nature is certainly quite akin to that of the player-queen in the strength of his feelings, intentions, in which the player-king sees the very source of this paradox.

In this context the appearance of the Ghost in Gertrude’s closet, already discussed above with regard to the Ghost’s overall impact on the plot, can also be seen as a direct response to this peculiarity of Hamlet’s behaviour. On the one hand, Hamlet has just killed a man who, he thought *afterwards*, was the king; on the other, he did it literally on the spur of the moment. There is nothing to suggest that he is concentrated on a murder when he enters Gertrude’s closet. He may be very forward with the queen whom he seems to be physically preventing from going away –

Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge;
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.
(3.4.24-6)

– but he certainly does not mean to ‘murder’ *her*, as she thinks. In fact, what seems to matter to the Ghost, and certainly for the plot, is that he has just left, quite improvidently, his *primary* target and thereby lost the only ideal opportunity he had to ‘drink hot blood’ in the way that the Ghost presumably wanted him to. Therefore, the Ghost’s visitation which is ‘but to whet’ Hamlet’s ‘almost blunted purpose’ can be entirely justified, and Hamlet’s intuition does not deceive him (‘Do you not come your tardy son to chide,/That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by/The important acting of your dread command? O, say!’ 3.4.122-5).

Hamlet’s remaining scene with Gertrude is quite engrossing, and it does seem to follow the Ghost’s urging to ‘step between her and her fighting soul’. However, as was

already noted above, the Ghost's very visitation comes at the moment when Gertrude is about to acknowledge her guilt completely ('O speak no more Hamlet!') and therefore problematises this acknowledgement. More fundamentally, the visitation emphasises the fact that Hamlet's actions have been consistently straying from his revenge duty; that the fact that he is in Gertrude's chamber at that particular moment in the play and that he is about to leave for England does not correspond to what the Ghost intended him to do at all. It is also quite remarkable that Hamlet does nothing to return to the supposedly main course of his action towards the end of this scene. He is completely absorbed in his desire to resuscitate his mother's virtue, to prevent her from laying 'that flattering unction to your soul,/That not your trespass, but my madness speaks' (3.4.165-6) and thus to minimise the impact of the Ghost, who remained invisible to Gertrude. He does manage to extract an oath from her at the end that she will not disclose to Claudius the truth that Hamlet is mad but in pretense. However, in the context of the scene, Gertrude will hardly find it difficult to agree with Hamlet's plea: for the most part of it she does believe that her son is mad. Therefore, her anxious retelling of the scene to Claudius at the start of the next Act is hardly a sign of Gertrude's full conversion to Hamlet's cause, especially given the fact that she can hardly connect Hamlet's murder of Polonius with a premeditated attempt at Claudius' life. This is certainly not the least because, characteristically, it did not seem as if Hamlet *himself* were planning the move and knew who was behind the arras.

The ending of his scene with Gertrude is no exception to this feature of his character. Not only does he know already that he 'must to England' but he also seems completely reconciled with the idea. Moreover, in Q2 he also knows that it is his 'two schoolfellows' that are escorting him (from whom he must indeed have learned about

the voyage on his way to his mother's closet) and that they have the 'mandate' to 'marshal him to knavery' (3.4.187, 188). He makes no mention of revenge. Instead, he closes the Act with some farewell, particularly insensitive, quipping at Polonius' dead body, which, just as in Act 2, suggests that his mind is again overtaken with the grotesque trivia of the moment and thus with oblivion of his supposed purpose. This is particularly remarkable because Hamlet does get to see Claudius two scenes later, in Act 4 scene 3, right before his departure. He is certainly closely guarded and can do nothing but keep quipping – fortunately Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still alive and help him to keep up the mood:

Hamlet A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

Claudius What dost you mean by this?

Hamlet Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.
(4.3.27-31)

'Somewhere half-buried here' may indeed lie 'a death threat against the usurper-king', as Greenblatt thinks ('Purgatory', 241). But this threat now can indeed be only very general and tentative ('how a king *may* go') because Claudius has no more doubts about Hamlet's intentions, despite Gertrude's apparent fidelity to her oath, and is taking no chances with him. For the same reason Hamlet's antic disposition from this point on is quite useless as means of dissimulation. Hamlet may want to use it still to demonstrate his defiance up to the last minute – calling Claudius his 'mother' – but this is now irrelevant to his revenge task. Quite characteristically again, in Q2 he uses up his last apparent opportunity for escape and thus a possibility to fulfil his duty, while his escorts

leave him alone and he is still on native soil, to deliver his last extended soliloquy on revenge, when faced with Fortinbras' advancing army. Overall, the soliloquy largely repeats the one at the end of Act 2, except that now Hamlet is blaming himself, his 'thinking too precisely on the event', rather than the Ghost. The diagnosis may be quite true or only scraping the surface by psychoanalytic or any other critical standards relying on a detached study, but the fact of that moment is that Hamlet is not trying to run away from his escorts or to change the course of the events in any way, even though, in Q2, he knows perfectly well the purpose of their trip and is perplexed as to the nature of his inaction. Thus this very soliloquy is itself a prime example of thinking too precisely on the event. And again as at the end of Act 2 this excessively 'precise' thinking, this bestial oblivion, becomes apparent to Hamlet quite suddenly, right at the moment when he finally emerges from the immediacy of the situation that surrounded him throughout Act 3 – the situation which for him was certainly not full of languishing and apathy. He indeed was ready to drink hot blood, he even killed a man who could have been a king; he almost reformed his mother. But now in the face of the trip to England all those moments are certainly not good enough, the ends of his thoughts proved to be not his own.

This fact acquires a specific poignancy at the end of Act 3 because of Polonius' death. It is not only quite undeserved, but it is the very proof of Hamlet's inadequacy as a revenger. Hamlet's irreverent parting with his remains

Indeed this counsellor
Is now most still, most secret and most grave,
Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
(3.4.235-7)

is not only unwarranted but spectacularly blind to the fact that it can serve perfectly well as Hamlet's own epitaph. To be sure, in his final soliloquy on revenge, mentioned above, Hamlet berates himself quite harshly and still hopes to change ('O, from this time forth,/ My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth' 4.4.70-1), but he certainly cannot appreciate the fact that his accidental killing of Polonius effectively seals his own and everyone else's fate – primarily because this has removed the benign schemer that stood between him and Claudius' guilty murderousness. It is Polonius indeed who unwittingly afforded Hamlet the last portion of time in the world of infinite possibilities by urging the king to allow him to spy on Hamlet once again in Gertrude's closet. It is on the way to that closet that Hamlet had his unique, seemingly accidental, chance to end the play with a single death as he promised Ophelia; the chance that he owed Polonius' unfortunate, even foolish, but also essentially quite touching insistence on 'love' as the 'origin and commencement' of Hamlet's 'lunacy' as much as he owed it to his own emotions and intellect; the chance that he certainly had to miss, given the fundamental affinity between his mind and Polonius' when it came to empathy.

3.7 Wounded Names

Hamlet's success at forcing Claudius to show his anxiety during *The Murder of Gonzago*, and then in turning Gertrude's eyes into the very core of her soul and eventually cleaving 'her heart in twain', may suggest that he does not lack empathy completely. However, these are, indeed, examples of forcing, cleaving one's way into someone's soul, not of subtle sounding of its depths. Admittedly, in the case of hardened sinners this sounding may not have seemed appropriate to Hamlet. Nevertheless, he *does* attempt it in the prayer scene, while he is 'scanning' the situation and the subtlety of his empathy certainly falls short of the complexity of its object.

This failure does make Hamlet, objectively, more humane towards Claudius at that moment. However, he exhibits essentially the same lack of subtlety towards Ophelia which, being certainly correlative to his performance in the prayer scene, practically nullifies the humane effect. Hamlet did think it possible that the apparently hardened murderer and adulterer like Claudius was capable of genuinely praying and thus advancing his soul to heaven, while in the previous two scenes he did not think it possible to see enough innocence in Ophelia's behaviour to forgive her. Hamlet may be a very self-conscious lover, only too aware of the awkwardness of the Italianate commonplaces in which he expresses his feelings – 'To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia' (2.2.120) – but, nevertheless, these commonplaces appear to be quite faithful expressions of his feelings. Judging by the nunnery scene, he certainly takes his love and Ophelia's apparent change of loyalty seriously enough to condemn her as 'wanton'. Even if the real addressee of his tirade is Gertrude, it is indeed Ophelia who is the first to trigger and receive the brunt of it.

In her first mad appearance in Act 4 scene 5, while she is more or less able to respond to questions, Ophelia sums up her plight with a brief reflection based on a folktale: 'They say the owl was a baker's daughter./ Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!' (4.5.37-8). It provides a quasi-Biblical but no less poignant counterpoint to the main theme of sudden, undeservedly painful reciprocation, evident in her funeral and bawdy songs. According to the *Norton* editors, the folktale she refers to features Christ turning a baker's daughter into an owl because she did not recognise him for who he was and gave him 'only a small loaf' (in other contemporary variants cited in *The Variorum Shakespeare* edition of the play Christ is replaced by a fairy). Hamlet's emphasis on the 'nunnery' in his major scene with Ophelia, and his continued railing against her as an embodiment of frailty, certainly make the *Norton* gloss on this tale more apposite to the context. Thus despite her distracted state Ophelia is quite aware of its inducing factor – the failure to come up to the unusually high and even purposefully unmeetable expectations. Her bawdy song in the same scene about the lover, who first promised to marry her only if she came to his bed and then turned her away precisely because she did, is certainly a further elaboration on the same theme, recalling Hamlet's own playing on Ophelia's feelings in the nunnery scene: 'I loved you once... You should not have believed me... I loved you not' (3.1.121-4). It is understandable that Hamlet, as was suggested above, is trying to break through Ophelia's innocence and ignorance which is unwittingly covering the 'devil', but it certainly never crosses his mind that she has been chosen as a cover precisely because of her perfect innocence, both about Hamlet's feelings (she does confess to Polonius already in Act 1 that she does not 'know what to think' about Lord Hamlet) and certainly about the nature of Claudius' scheme.

The second and larger part of Act 4, after Hamlet's departure for England, is dominated by the poignant outcome of this mismatch. First, it is certainly Ophelia's madness and then it is her accidental suicide. Laertes who, in secret has come from France, shows himself quite capable of the oblivious absorption in the moment, 'thinking too precise on the event', which has become so characteristic of the play's action in Acts 2 and 3 while he was away. To be sure, he is swept by the righteous and daredevil anger against the murderer of his father:

How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with:
To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.
(4.5.108-14)

And then he is even more shaken by his sister's pitifully distracted state:

O heat, dry up my brains! tears seven times salt,
Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!
By heaven, thy madness shall be paid by weight,
Till our scale turn the beam. O rose of May!
Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!
O heavens! Is't possible, a young maid's wits
Should be as mortal as an old man's life?
Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine,
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves.

(4.5.138-147)

This turbulence of emotion is repeated throughout Ophelia's two remaining entrances in this scene. Indeed, Laertes does not fail to link Ophelia's state to his revenge ('Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge,/ It could not move thus' 4.5. 150-1). But what becomes remarkable in view of Ophelia's end, announced by grief-stricken and amazed

Gertrude at the end of the next scene, is that Laertes is so much concentrated on vengeance that he *forgets* that his sister needs care now. He, who would not trust her to exchange letters with Hamlet while his father was alive and she herself was still sane, has just let her out alone in her current state: according to the stage directions, Ophelia's exit itself after her last song (at 4.5.161) is hardly noticed in itself – Laertes at this moment is apparently looking up at heavens to ask, 'Do you see this, O God?' (4.5.162). This can certainly be hardly held against him, but it does underscore the lack of empathy which led to this situation in the first place. Hamlet, who is about to claim that he loved Ophelia more than forty thousand brothers in her very grave, certainly is not there to save her from drowning. Ironically, while he can see in his cause the 'portraiture' of Fortinbras' and Laertes' respective causes (as he puts it after his return in Act 5), he is unable to appreciate Ophelia as his most poignant counterpart in her obvious obedience to her father's will and therefore to forgive her in time. Laertes' thoughts of revenge drive him very far indeed from the still living reality; it seems that having seen Ophelia in her mad state, he has buried her already in his mind when he appeals to God instead of her.

It is perhaps then not entirely paradoxical that Claudius proves to be the most empathetic character of those remaining alive by the end of Act 4 – which must certainly be attributed, first of all, to the increasing level of apprehension in which he finds himself. He spends most of Act 4 and the beginning of Act 5 on the successful manipulation of *both* Laertes and Hamlet into his final scheme against his nephew's life. However, it is also true that by this point in the play each of the three antagonists involved proves too anxious to let the scheme run smoothly.

Claudius' initial plan – to have Laertes' sword simply unbated and rely on his swordsmanship – is certainly the most sound because it would have aroused the least suspicion. But his desire to make *sure* that Hamlet does become the 'living monument' to Ophelia's grave (5.1.185) is too great not to be tempted by Laertes' idea of the poisoned sword to the extent that it prompts him to the idea of the poisoned chalice. This will certainly amplify suspicions much more than a poisoned sword, but no one at that moment has time to consider calmly the relative merits of all the options.

The contrast between the plotters and the newly arrived Hamlet is again most striking. He left in Act 4 with a crushing sense of underachievement as a revenger, but when he comes back, due to perhaps the most accidental miracle in the play, the pirates, he does nothing to sweep to his task. Instead, he proceeds to engage in his favourite activity of meditation on death. Surely, he does mention that now, after he has discovered the king's plot against his life, he has even more reasons than ever to kill the king –

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon –
He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage – is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(5.1.70-7)

– but he again does not hurry to start considering ways to do it. Not only is he simply content to have the extra reason for the time being, but he is also content to engage in a fencing match with Laertes, the man who has just tried strangling him. Hamlet does acknowledge that he has serious misgivings about this affair ('But thou wouldst not

think how ill all's here about my heart: but it is no matter.' 5.2.143). Yet he brushes it off as 'foolery' more worthy of a 'woman' (5.2.145) and defies 'augury' referring to the well-known passage in Matthew 10:29¹²⁵:

Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special
providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now,
'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the
readiness is all: since no man has aught of what he
leaves, what is't to leave betimes?
(5.2.147-8)

Psychoanalysts, traditional and modern, seem certainly right in their skepticism regarding Hamlet's air of religious illumination with which he seemed to return from the voyage. For a man who appears to have become religiously reconciled to the impropriety of revenge and to the overarching providence of the Father, Hamlet becomes too much interested in the match.

At its start, Hamlet outwardly acknowledges and also simultaneously distantiates himself from his guilt towards Laertes, aligning himself with the wronged party against his 'madness':

Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman[...]
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet:
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness [...]
Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
And hurt my brother.

¹²⁵ 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.'

(5.2.150-68)

This certainly sounds very gentle, but he knows that Laertes cannot forgive him; indeed, the speech sounds more like a gentlemanly disclaimer of the purpose of the 'evil' 'so far' as his 'madness' is concerned, but not as a refusal to pay for it. Laertes' reply confirms this double meaning by referring to his 'revenge' and refusal to reconcile 'Till by some elder masters, of known honour,/I have a voice and precedent of peace' (5.2.173-4), while also acknowledging the receipt of Hamlet's 'offer'd love as love' in the meantime. Both Hamlet and Laertes know perfectly well that the only 'elder master' of authority left alive would certainly not encourage any reconciliation, and both are sure that the dead 'elder masters' to whom they pledged themselves respectively – especially Old Hamlet but also quite possibly Polonius – would not encourage it either. Thus they both seem to enter into the match with the understanding that their reconciliation is only temporary.

However, the fact that Hamlet heedlessly plunges into the match, scoring hits, urging Laertes not to 'dally' and 'pass' at him with his 'best violence' (5.2.234-5) seems to suggest that Hamlet does not see the quite conspicuous threat in Laertes' overtly gentlemanly answer which plainly says that Hamlet's love will be accepted as love *at the same time* as Laertes is waiting for some elder master to reconcile them – therefore, accepted as love but returned as hate. In other words, Hamlet does not seem to realise that their reconciliation is not only provisional but is also only an appearance to cover the plot against his life which is already under way. While he did recognise the affinity between Laertes' and his own situation with regard to their fathers immediately before the match, he cannot seem to contemplate the possibility that Laertes, unlike him, is capable of plotting a straightforward, that is covert and dishonourable, revenge. He

indeed professes to 'love' him ever and presents him to Horatio as a 'very noble youth' earlier in the Act. In Hamlet himself, as the whole play shows, the honour, remembrance, and revenge have always been at odds, and he is clearly considering Laertes to follow the same pattern (unlike his two schoolfellows whom he had the chance to size up) – i.e. waiting for an ideal opportunity at which these three motivations will coincide while at present being, as Claudius characterises him to Laertes in preparation for their plot, 'remiss,/Most generous and free from all contriving' (4.6.147-8).

Because Claudius' estimate of Hamlet is essentially right, the success of his scheme seems perfectly sure. Only the third chain of pure accidents (after the arrival of the actors in Act 2 and the intrusion of the pirates in Act 4) – the shuffling of the rapiers and the queen's insistence on drinking from the poisoned cup – decisively turn the tide against Claudius. This purely coincidental outcome of the final scene and the whole play demonstrates again that, while it certainly has been influenced by the psychology of the chief characters in the drama, its final shape can in no sense be seen as straightforwardly predetermined by them. Hamlet's elliptical dying request to Horatio is indeed motivated by the finally formed awareness of virtually a complete lack of achievement on his part, of the immense gap between what has really happened in the five Acts and what Hamlet was hoping to accomplish, of the wounds which his acts have left unhealed in his father's and his own name, as well as in the names of the other innocent victims. It is certainly easy to agree with psychoanalytic critics that Hamlet's failure to reconcile honour, remembrance, and revenge without tainting his mind and making the conflict uncontrollable is paradoxically the most faithful remembrance of the Ghost's message. That message not only already doubted Hamlet ('taint not thy mind', 'remember me')

but through the figure of the Ghost itself, armed but incorporeal, indeed represented the impossibility of revenge – that is, in the state of being woken up by death when any action is already too late. The fact that Hamlet dies not from the traditional, honest, almost instantly fatal sword wound but, quite like his father, from a poisoned scratch which leaves him enough life only to feel the hardening grip of death certainly brings back the memory of the Ghost.

However, there certainly are important differences between Hamlet's case and his father's. First of all, he does manage to take the culprit together with him and thus clears the throne (and the royal bed) of Denmark from the 'damned incest' and fratricide. Secondly, he does manage to realise the huge 'imperfections' of his progress, to prevent the only informed witness, Horatio, from committing a solidarity suicide, and pledge him to remembrance. However, unlike the obligation between Hamlet and his father, there is no revenge and no secrecy involved in this pledge for Horatio because indeed everyone, both guilty and innocent, is already dead. This inseparability of one group of deaths from the other, which for the psychoanalysts and traditional critics, spells the suspension of redemption and entrenchment of trauma contains in fact the very hope for the reversal of this outcome. It is not because the plot makes it easier to believe that Ophelia will indeed become an 'angel', as Laertes prophesies, or that 'angels' will sing Hamlet to his rest (as they should, then, have done for Polonius), as Horatio wishes. It is precisely because the play makes such a belief more challenging that it makes it also more valuable and desirable. It does not reinstate the formulas of justice and plausibility by presenting characters who set out to erase them systematically and more or less consciously, thus bringing ruin upon themselves (like Richard III or Iago). On the contrary, its characters come to grief because they are trying to follow these formulas to

the best of their abilities (even Claudius is quite an unwilling villain compared to the examples above). Their desires which are both motivated by these formulas and constantly led astray from them in the immediacy of their interaction with each other constitute the basis for the seductive impression that they are better than the sum of their failures, formulas, and desires. Their plea for suspension of equivalence in judgment and for tarrying with their story therefore pertains to the very possibility of redemption.

4. Conclusion

So, what is exactly the place where Freud, *Oedipus*, and *Hamlet* meet? In terms of the above analysis, it is certainly the place of primal seduction – the place that, while possessing a multiplicity of concrete shapes within respective epochs and genres, transcends their historical and aesthetic contingency.

However, this transcendence is not that of Freud's phylogenesis which strives to achieve an absolute degree of transcendence by endowing the pre-historic scenarios of the so-called primal horde with the status comparable to that of Kant's *a priori* concepts. Such a conceptualisation of determination of experience not only results in the problem of infinite regression and 'things-in-themselves' (both for Kant and Freud) but, specifically in Freud's case, replicates the very act that it purports to analyse: primal repression. The momentous events of the human and even biological pre-history (such as the primal patricide in *Totem and Taboo* and the evolution of life from primal nothingness in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) are certainly neither events nor categories. Like the material in the unconscious, they are devoid of historical and logical consistency.

Nevertheless, it is this metastatic development of uncertainty both at the thematic and structural level of Freud's thought after 1897 – which Laplanche came to designate the 'unfinished Copernican revolution' – that, as we have seen, has served as the necessary intuitive medium for grasping the specificity of the studied object. For the opponents of psychoanalysis this development has certainly been metastatic in the narrow, clinical sense of uncontrollable invasion and depredation into other areas of

social and individual cultural activity. But what becomes unavoidably clear after investigating the logic of Freudian evolution and the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature is that in this case psychoanalysis itself is, at least no less, an object of invasion. Tragedy – the paradigmatic object of psychoanalytic attention – predates not only Freud by several millennia but indeed the human subject of the recorded history. Moreover, tragedy itself always thematically insists on its absolute precedence in the form of the daimonic presence (be it a classical Greek deity or a ghost). Ascribing these typical features to the either subjectively authorial or objectively formed acquiescence in genre tradition does nothing to reduce its imposition. Narrowing the plot to a more precise set of coordinates – clinical, intellectual, political – is equally unhelpful in explaining not only the emergence of the tragic (and in general artistic) phenomenon as such but, more specifically, its power over the audience – irreducible to auto-stimulation and straightforward catharsis.

Sophocles' *Oedipus* may present a revelation that is more painful than clear, but its ambiguity and pain only increase the effect of the daimonic presence, sending 'convulsions' through the Chorus (Gould, 1307). Hamlet almost dies in vain, and practically brings down with him his whole kingdom, thus seemingly dissolving the last remnant of his father's glory; it is Fortinbras who comes to Elsinore to claim the rights of *his* memory. Yet this destruction and complete surrender of the duty by the protagonist only amplifies the presence of the Ghost of Hamlet, now covering indeed the whole kingdom. It is the story of this Ghost – and his own father – that Fortinbras sits down to listen to.

The respective plots, as was argued above, are thus fundamentally displaced with regard to what should be their central axes – the protagonists. The latter do not

exclusively determine the development either of their plots or the constitution of their narrative traditions, although as the characters representing inspired and incisive individuals they strongly try to. Instead, it is indeed the figure of the murdered and thus absent (ghostly) father that constitutes the other, significant gravitational force. The maternal element is no less important. It has a crucial influence in the establishment of the father as the centre of the conflict; however, it acquires its dramatic/traumatic significance only through its implication in the father's predicament.

This feature in Sophocles and Shakespeare's treatment of the source material does not lead to what Laplanche calls a 'Ptolemaic recentring' of the plot simply on another dramatic character. On the contrary, through the father's characteristic detachment and vulnerability the emphasis on his plight that serves as a starting point for Oedipus and Hamlet's progression through the plot results in a thoroughly dualist, other-centred vision of the conflict (characteristic of Laplanche's conceptualisation of primal seduction). The father captures the imagination of the protagonist – and evidently, the audience and playwrights – as the figure that, par excellence, consists of and represents the other's message. As much as it can be the figure of authority and tradition, it is also thoroughly dependent for its constitution on these cultural and familial formations; its identity and its very being is determined not only by the acts of the father himself but even more substantially by the acts of the others upon him and his memory. This significant passive dimension in no way diminishes the influence of the father figure. The crucial insight with which Sophocles' and Shakespeare's father figures are created is indeed in their ability to provoke action and development through the enigma of their detached, displaced status with regard to those with whom they interact and with regard to the status of the father as such. Thus, the displacement of the protagonists with regard

to the main axis, the message, of the plot (affecting certainly all the other characters) is the result of the interaction with the father's message – the interaction that catalyses the accession to the 'primordial split' between the other and the message that he or she carries, which Laplanche designates as the *sine qua non* of seduction (or more particularly transference), and thus development of the human subject. The father's traditional male, heterosexual attributes here – in Laplanchean rereading of Freud as well as in a careful reading of tragedy – are clearly relegated to contingency: what remains is the relationship of a subject to the enigmatic message which, precisely because of its primordial split from the human subject, comes, like the oracle or the Ghost, in what appears as the third, neutral person ('it').

It is this kind of transcendence – 'transcendence of transference', as Laplanche calls it with regard to the subject's attempts to translate the enigma into a personalised message – that the above analysis has attempted to articulate with regard to *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* in the context of Freud's psychoanalysis. It is the transcendence that, just like the tragic experience, can never quite escape the seemingly contingent, traumatic circumstances from which it springs. There is practically no hope of 'curing' the primordial split, the fundamentally alienated, paternal condition of the subject. No one can restore Oedipus' vision and Hamlet's 'noble mind'. However, there certainly is freedom and endurance in their spectacular failure.

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