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Mommy Issues: Hamlet's Mistreatment of Ophelia a result of his Narcissistic Attachment
to Gertrude

Throughout the course of *Hamlet*, Hamlet's actions towards Ophelia undergo a radical change, beginning with devoted love, and quickly transforming into outright cruelty and disrespect. This transformation proves baffling to the reader because there is no consciously given statement that identifies the source of Hamlet's change in behavior. However, by using a psychoanalytic framework on the specifics of melancholia put forth by Freud, the subconscious source behind Hamlet's barbaric behavior becomes clear. What may seem like an unwarranted change in Hamlet's behavior is actually due to a slight to Hamlet's ego, a result of the loss of a narcissistic bond with his mother, Gertrude. As a loving and loyal wife, Gertrude was idolized by Hamlet who identified in her the piece of himself that allowed him to be a devoted romantic partner. Because his identity is tied to Gertrude's, his loss of the idealized image of her as a constant and virtuous romantic partner, causes him to also lose that part of himself, resulting in his complete role change in his own romantic relationship with Ophelia.

In his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud differentiates normal mourning from the pathological melancholia. In doing so, he provides a framework for us to analyze errant behaviors that are motivated by subconscious attachments that we cannot physically see and which depart from normal grieving habits. While mourning and

melancholia both stem from the loss of a loved one or idea, melancholia surpasses the bounds of mourning because it does not run its course in a timely manner. Rather than a standard, healthy grieving process where the individual eventually accepts the loss, a melancholic individual cannot rationalize the loss, which results in pathological symptoms such as self-deprecating habits and an abnormal elongation of the mourning period. Furthermore, melancholia is characterized specifically by the loss of a narcissistic object-cathexis (an attachment to an object or person), which negatively affects the ego of the melancholic individual and makes the loss internal to the individual. In other words, the subject of attachment was chosen because the individual saw his or herself in the person, and they felt a desire to make that person a part of them, absorb them. When that loved one is then lost, the individual then loses his or herself as well since a piece of their identity was intimately connected to that individual, resulting in self-degrading behavior stemming from the slighted ego (244-250).

Hamlet certainly errs on the side of melancholia, displaying outright some of the more observable symptoms such as an abnormal grieving length, prompting his mother to ask why his father's death is "so particular" with him (1.2.66-75), and vocal self-deprecating habits, out-and-out labeling himself "proud" and "vengeful" (3.1.121-6). And although Hamlet proclaims that he is only play-acting madness through an "antic disposition" (1.5.171-2), it's clear that there is more going on underneath the surface. There is a discontinuity between Hamlet's past amicable behavior towards Ophelia and his mean-spirited treatment that leads to her suicide, a treatment that is intimately tied to his mental state since its genesis is sparked after the death of his father and quick

remarriage of his mother. With Freud's structural arsenal, we are able to read between the lines and connect the two events.

Hamlet's actions towards Ophelia in the heyday of their affection seem to be nothing less than loyal and kind. When Polonius questions Ophelia early on in the text about the nature of her encounters with Hamlet, she freely replies, "My lord, he hath importun'd me with love / In honorable fashion," (1.3.110-1). Ophelia consistently holds that his affections towards her have been nothing but "honorable," even when Polonius and Laertes question whether Hamlet's love is true, or just a passing fancy. Whether his affections for her are true love or not, what matters is that he showed honor and loyalty in his courtship of her, particularly evidenced in a love letter that Polonius obtained:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love. (2.2.116-9)

The words Hamlet showers Ophelia with are nothing but kind and gentle, and he seems overtly concerned with proving his loyalty to her. He would rather her doubt that "the stars are fire," or "that the sun doth move,"—doubt observations of nature—rather than her think him dishonest in his feelings.

At numerous points in the play, Hamlet is made out to be loyal and constant in his love towards Ophelia during their pre-play relationship, but these are not the characteristics encountered in the text when Hamlet and Ophelia interact directly. Rather than loyal and kind, Hamlet is made out to be cruel and inconstant in his affections, taking back all of what he promised her before:

I did love you once...

You should not have believ'd me, for virtue cannot so

(inoculate) our old stock but we shall relish of it. I lov'd

you not. (3.1.114, 116-8)

His contradicting exclamations of "I did love you once" and "I lov'd you not" deeply contrast the loyal and constant characteristics that he previously portrayed, instead making him seem flighty and false. Furthermore the lines "You should not have believ'd me, for virtue cannot so / [inoculate] our old stock but we shall relish of it" reveal that the cause of Hamlet's change in treatment towards Ophelia is deep rather than superficial. He blatantly tells her that his identity and essence, his "old stock," is not capable of swaying to virtue even if it years to.

No minor action or event could easily cause a change so deep in Hamlet's identity that he departs from a loyal and virtuous romantic demeanor, to an inconstant and cruel one, so we must turn to the life-changing events which are the focus of the text: the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother. Although his family believes the death of his father to be the root of Hamlet's stormy countenance and elongated mourning (1.2.72-3), the topic that encompasses his first soliloquy is actually the quick remarriage of his mother, Gertrude, to Claudius, which is majorly revealing about what is truly subconsciously bothering Hamlet. It is not the untimely death of his father that torments him into vocalizing criticisms, but the fact that his mother, whom he believed to be wholly in love with his father, remarried so quickly:

Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on, and yet, within a month —

Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman! —

...married with my uncle. (1.2.143-6, 151)

What Hamlet reveals in this speech is that he lost his mother. Not in the same physical way that he lost his father, but with Gertrude's remarriage he forever parted with the image of his mother as a loving and devoted wife, loyal to his father in her love. Hamlet mourns the mother he lost just as he mourns his deceased father, but he has a harder time reconciling his maternal loss, since it is this loss that seems to dominate his lines in the play. He laments that while her love seemed abundant "as if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on..." she seemed to get over her husband's death "within a month" and marry again. He curses Gertrude—and women in general—for her inconstancy and "frailty," unable to reconcile that her identity changed in his eyes from the glorified image of his mother as a devoted romantic partner to a false one.

Hamlet's inability to accept his mother's identity change is key to deciphering his sudden mistreatment of Ophelia, because in his mistreatment, he emulates the same traits he damns his mother for. Just as Hamlet perceives Gertrude to break her promises of love to Hamlet's father, Hamlet in turn breaks his promises of love to Ophelia, imitating Gertrude in her "frailty." His complete change in role in his romantic relationship with Ophelia suggests that his maternal loss severed a narcissistic attachment to Gertrude since in his loss, he seems to have lost himself. His actions before Gertrude's remarriage revealed him to be a steadfast and constant romantic partner to Ophelia, but when Gertrude deviated from her initial role, so did Hamlet. The man who once entreated Ophelia to "doubt that the stars are fire" before she doubted him quickly degraded to

telling her that he both “loved [her] once” and “lov’d [her] not.” What must be logically concluded is that Hamlet identified a piece of himself in Gertrude, particularly the piece of his identity that allowed him to be a loyal and true romantic partner. When Gertrude lost that same role in his eyes, Hamlet lost it too because his mother was his touchstone for that piece of his identity. Since he is left floundering without an identity when it comes to romantic relationships, he adopts the manner in which he sees Gertrude behaving even though he despises it, because he once saw himself in her, and in melancholy he refuses to believe that she is no longer a part of his identity and wishes for her to remain a part of it.

If there are any lingering doubts that Hamlet mentally grapples with the effects of a broken narcissistic object-cathexis, one need look no further than his public reaction to Ophelia’s death. His first reaction is not to truly mourn the loss of Ophelia, but to outshow Laertes in the gravity of his despair:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand’ring stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane! (5.1.240-4)

Hamlet uses a public spectacle to vocalize the apparent depth of his grief in order to prove that he truly was loyal to Ophelia the entire time, which his actions show to be false. Like a gallivanting actor he presents himself as a tragic figure whose grief makes even the “wand’ring stars” pause. What Hamlet doesn’t do is mention Ophelia in his speech, but solely speaks in “I’s” and “he’s,” his language pointing to the true subject of

his concern. His true motivation here is not to honestly grieve, but to desperately try to repair the loyal and steadfast identity that he lost through Gertrude's remarriage. In a word, his concerns are narcissistic.

Without the work of Freud, Hamlet's mistreatment of Ophelia would remain to appear mystifying and half-connected to the rest of the plot, but with a psychoanalytic framework, Ophelia's suffering becomes a quintessential plot point which reveals a quantifiable symptom of Hamlet's mental pathology. Because Hamlet's cruelty towards Ophelia is a result of Hamlet's wounded ego, caused by the breaking of his narcissistic object-cathexis with Gertrude, we can say that his cruelty speaks more to Hamlet's identity crisis, more than anything Ophelia might have done. Although Hamlet lobs insults at Ophelia, the true target of his ire is his broken identity leaving Ophelia to be an innocent bystander, albeit targeted, in his crisis.

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