Benjamin K. Paplham

Dr. Scheler

ENGL 325

18 March 2016

**What If I Say I'm Not Like the Others? What If I Say I’m Not Just Another One of Your Plays? You’re the Pretender. What If I Say I Will Never Surrender?**

*I'm the voice inside your head / You refuse to hear / I'm the face that you have to face / Mirrored in your stare.

~ Foo Fighters

When Claudius follows in the tradition of the first Biblical brothers and commits fratricide, it is the catalyst to an uncontrollable implosion of identification crises and vengeful deaths. Yet, despite the actions of the metaphoric Cain, it is Queen Gertrude on whom Hamlet spends the majority of the play vexing and fretting. Hamlet’s obsessive problems with his mother’s virtuous or vile nature have long been a source of contention for philosophers and critics. Consequently, many ideas have been proposed about Hamlet and Gertrude’s puzzling relationship, especially in regards to Gertrude’s sexuality. However, the sexuality of the mother is only a small aspect to a larger importance, which details Hamlet’s view of his own identity in relation to Gertrude’s actions. Hamlet perceives his mother’s remarriage as an emasculation of his manhood, sparking an identity crisis that both fears and strives to validate its own worth.

Janet Adelman is a critic who sought to clarify the nature of Hamlet and Gertrude’s relationship in her essay, “Man and Wife is One Flesh: Hamlet and the Confrontation with the Material Body”. In the essay, she poses the issue of why Hamlet behaves so irately antagonistic toward his mother. On a purely textual level, Hamlet’s reasoning is that he is upset with the incestuous act of marrying her husband’s brother and the possibility that Gertrude played a role in Old Hamlet’s murder. However, Adelman digs into the psychoanalysis of Hamlet’s words and
deeds. She argues that Hamlet has raised his father up to such god-like status (Hyperion) and designates his uncle into such lowly stature (Satyr) that when Gertrude marries Claudius, it automatically lowers her to his level. However, this disrupts Hamlet’s idealistic image of his mother, as a virginal queen and the emblem of Elsinore’s purity. If Gertrude had not remarried Claudius, then his image of her would not be tarnished. Therefore, he transfers all the blame for his father’s death onto Gertrude and her sexuality, believing her to have killed her husband twice: once by “poison” and once by “bed”.

While Adelman’s essay helps to explain why Hamlet treats his mother poorly, Sigmund Freud’s philosophies can help to understand why Hamlet places so much emphasis on Gertrude’s sexuality. In one of Sigmund Freud’s essays, “Mourning and Melancholia”, he refers to what he called “narcissistic regression”. He breaks down his reasoning behind narcissistic regression by referring to libido (sexual desire) and cathexis (unhealthy fixation on an object). Freud proposes that someone has both a libido and cathexis upon an object, person, or ideal. When that object of desire disappears, the cathexis is shattered. However, the libido still remains. If the sexual desire cannot attach itself to another object, it retreats into the ego and once “he [has] suffered a loss in regard to an object; [it] points to a loss in regard to his ego” (247). The identity changes, basing itself on associating the abandoned object with dissatisfaction for myself. On a narcissistic level, the ego had developed such a close bond with the object and so little resistance to prevent its influence, that the ego substituted itself for the object-cathexis. Once that happens, the ego regress into a sadist stage where it treats itself as an object, leading to a sadistically suicidal and violent identity.

Freud’s philosophy on the narcissistic regression can help to explain the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude. Even before Hamlet learns from his ghostly father of Claudius’
fratricide, Hamlet had a strange fixation on his mother’s sexuality, lamenting that she is in an incestuous marriage with her brother-in-law. In line with Freud’s philosophy, Hamlet’s cathexis is shattered as the moral ideas he attributes with his mother have disappeared, but his Oedipal libido has nothing to reattach itself to. The libido retreats inside Hamlet's ego, causing him to narcissistically obsess over his family's relationships alter his self-identification. In questioning his identity, Hamlet begins to consider his ego as an object, which essentially has emasculated his image. His manhood now in flux, Hamlet assigns the blame onto his mother for destroying the object-cathexis he held of her chastity:

HAMLET: Sir, I lack advancement.

ROSENCRANTZ: How can that be, when you have the voice of / the King himself for your succession in Denmark?

HAMLET: Ay, sir, but ‘While the grass grows’ [the seed starves]—the proverb / is something musty” (3.2.320-324)

Hamlet’s desires are being starved to death, and in particular as he comments to Rosencrantz, his right of kingship. Stripping the Prince of Elsinore of his claim to succession is Gertrude’s marriage and consequent sexual relations with Claudius, who, being the present king, would see his own son inherit the throne. Paradoxically, Hamlet has become a Prince without an inheritance; yet, he is the son of the former king. In combining both Adelman and Freud’s philosophies, it becomes clear that Hamlet’s self-identity is directly linked to his mother’s sexuality.

Hamlet sees Gertrude as his most savage of opponents. By right, following the Old Hamlet’s death, the line of succession should have passed onto the firstborn son, Prince Hamlet. However, this lineage is obviously disturbed upon Gertrude’s hasty (under Hamlet's opinion)
and incestuous remarriage to her brother-in-law, Claudius. Basically, what Gertrude has done in Hamlet’s mind is to emasculate him. By marrying Claudius, Gertrude has implicitly implied to Hamlet that not only is he not good enough to assume power over Elsinore but an incestuous monarchy is better than he would be. As Adelman points out, the Prince is a substitute for the King and once the King has disappeared from the picture, the Prince assumes that physical and symbolic identity. Specifically for *Hamlet*, Gertrude strips her son of his rightfully claimed identity. Furthermore, as the father substitute, in Hamlet’s eyes Gertrude’s marriage transforms into a personal double betrayal against the respective king-husband and king-son dynamic.

What makes the emasculation worse is that Hamlet considers Claudius to be of unscrupulous character. Even before his father’s ghosts’s revelation, Hamlet clearly displays that he sees his uncle-stepfather as morally ambiguous. And after his ghostly parent has finished entreating Hamlet to avenge his father’s “murther”, the Prince’s fears are attested. But once again, Hamlet cannot help but understand Claudius’ crime as a direct correlation with his mother’s sexuality. He cries: “O most pernicious woman! O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!” (105-106) Hamlet, already feeling indisposed at being deposed, interprets Claudius’ reign as personal sleight against himself. The natural question follows: if Hamlet’s uncle is such a villainous and treasonous man, then why would Hamlet’s mother choose Claudius over her own son? Gertrude’s betrayal is rationalized as a statement about Hamlet’s own identity. As stated previously, Hamlet’s libido for his mother’s sexual purity retreats inside his ego and manifests itself as self-deprecation and melancholia.

Because he lost his manhood, Hamlet seeks a way to reclaim it. The only way for him to do so is to seize the throne itself, his inheritance and symbol for his object-cathexis. However, what Hamlet comes to realize is that in order to assume power, he would need to usurp his uncle.
The problem with that is Claudius, by marrying Gertrude, has become the substitute for his father, and if he were to kill his uncle, Hamlet would be emulating the same familiar blood crime for which he is contemplating killing his uncle. However, if Hamlet does not overthrow Claudius, it reaffirms the belief in his own cowardice and justifies Gertrude's decision to prefer her brother as king rather than her son. Either way, Hamlet's identity is strictly confined to his inability to assume his father's role, which he attributes fault to Gertrude.

Hamlet suffers an identity crisis in which he questions his self-worth and what it means in light of his mother's incestuous remarriage. Drawing upon Janet Adelman and Sigmund Freud's theories, Hamlet's psychosis follows a person who views himself as his father's replacement, but his value as that substitute is rejected, causing him to despairingly question his role.