The Pretender: Hamlet’s Shattered Identity and Lost Manhood

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 implosion of identification crises for Hamlet’s eponymous character. One such identification crisis arising within Hamlet is his own image in relation to his mother, Gertrude. Hamlet believes his mother to have acted unfaithfully to his father in her remarriage. However, the simple conviction does not fully explain why Hamlet seems to obsess over his mother’s sexuality, berating Gertrude repeatedly on her issue while barely confronting Claudius about his murder. Consequently, Hamlet’s persistence betrays that his mother’s virtuous or vile nature must directly relate to his understanding of his own identity. 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 sought to clarify Hamlet and Gertrude’s relationship in her essay, “Man and Wife is One Flesh: Hamlet and the Confrontation with the Material Body”. She poses the issue of why Hamlet behaves so irately antagonistic toward his mother. On a surface level, Hamlet is upset with the Gertrude’s incestuous marriage and the possibility that his mother played a role in his father’s murder. However, Adelman digs deeper into the psychoanalysis of Hamlet to explore why he appears to intentionally single out Gertrude. The reason, Adelman argues, is due to the fusion of Old Hamlet and Claudius: “The fathers Hamlet tries so strenuously
to keep separated keep threatening to collapse into one another; even when he wants to kill one to avenge the other, he cannot quite tell them apart” (265). Hamlet has raised his father up to such god-like status (Hyperion) and designates his uncle on an animalistic 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 Hamlet would not have problems deciphering where god and animal begin and end. 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 explains why Hamlet treats his mother poorly, Sigmund Freud’s philosophies help to understand why Hamlet places so much emphasis on Gertrude’s sexuality. In Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, he refers to what he calls “narcissistic regression”, which is directly linked to his other concepts of 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 but the libido 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 the ego. Narcissistically, the ego develops such a close bond with the object and has so little resistance to prevent its influence, that the ego substitutes itself for the object-cathexis. Once that happens, the ego regress into a sadistic stage where it treats itself as an object, leading to a suicidal and violent identity.
Combining both Adelman and Freud’s ideas draws a clearer picture as to Hamlet’s psychosis. By transferring the blame of his father’s murder onto Gertrude’s sexuality, he is also forming a connection between his libido and his identity. Because his mother is the Queen of Elsinore, her purity is symbolic of the country’s own virtue, and as the Prince—as a figurehead of the country’s righteousness as well—any tarnish on the country is being transferred as a tarnish on himself. While Hamlet’s libido on his mother is not necessarily Oedipal in nature, he has a cathetic interest in keeping Gertrude’s purity intact. Hamlet’s cathexis-object on his mother’s sexuality is broken with her incestuous remarriage, and he directly blames Gertrude for this shattering:

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, as the seed is in the proverb; the entire state of Denmark is being starved—all thanks to Gertrude’s impropriety. He has placed so much emphasis upon idealizing Gertrude’s purity that he has substituted himself for what her sexuality represents. Once that has been dismantled, Hamlet’s ego is personally splintered and loses sight of what his identity actually means.

With his identity gone, Hamlet’s ego has essentially been emasculated. Everything that he bases his identity on has been destroyed with Gertrude’s remarriage. As such, Hamlet’s ego cannot differentiate between what he represents to the state and what his mother represents. To Hamlet, there is a oneness among his two fathers, his mother, and himself:
HAMLET: Farewell, dear mother.

KING: Thy loving father, Hamlet.

HAMLET: My mother: father and mother is man and wife, man

and wife is one flesh—so, my mother (4.3.47-50).

This oneness creates a crisis in which Hamlet’s lineage has been thrown into anarchy. His
mother is his father, his father is his uncle, his uncle is his mother—Hamlet is unable to grant his
parental figures autonomy, which in turn causes him to doubt the nature of his country and doubt
himself. If he is not his father’s son, then whose is he? If he is not his father’s son, then that
means his identity has been emasculated. For Hamlet, the problem circulates back to his
mother’s sexuality, which is the crux of where his libido was thrown into disarray.

What makes the emasculation worse is that Hamlet knows that Claudius is a man of
unscrupulous character. After his ghostly father finishes entreating Hamlet to avenge the foul
“murther”, the Prince’s fears are affirmed. But again, Hamlet cannot help but understand
Claudius’ crime in direct correlation with Gertrude’s sexuality: “O most pernicious woman! / O
villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!” (1.5.105-106). This was the moment where Hamlet’s
cathexis-object is shattered. As if the incestuous marriage were not bad enough, now he is knows
that the metaphoric Cain does not even deserve to be king. In Hamlet’s mind, he interprets
Claudius’ reign as personal sleight against himself, for if Gertrude had not remarried then
Hamlet would have succeeded his father. The natural question follows: if Claudius is villainous
and treacherous, then why would Gertrude choose Claudius over her own son? Gertrude’s
betrayal is rationalized as a statement about Hamlet’s own identity as Prince and representative
of Elsinore. Since she has chosen Claudius, then it must somehow indicate that Hamlet was a
worse option than a murderous and incestuous relationship.
With his ego emasculated, Hamlet has reached a sadistic side to his identity. His self-worth is correlated to Gertrude’s sexuality, which means that in order to reclaim his manhood, Hamlet must rectify his mother’s tarnished purity, the symbol for his object-cathexis. However, Hamlet realizes that in order to do so, he needs to usurp his uncle-mother-father:

HAMLET: A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
Why, this is [hire and salary], not revenge.
’A 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? (3.3.76-82)

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 ego.
Works Cited

