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THE CONSPIRACY OF GENDER: HAMLET'S AND OPHELIA'S PASSIONATE HISTRIONICS

BY

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Paranoid Universes

When Lawrence Olivier decided to film Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in 1948, he explicitly chose to stage it as the Oedipal dilemma of a mourning prince, introducing his cinematic version with the motto, "this is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind," and leaving out Fortinbras as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, so as to focus exclusively on the displaced patricidal fantasies of his protagonist. Yet produced at the onset of the cold war, and thus at least implicitly reflecting cultural anxieties about surveillance that were to dominate this period, Olivier's *Hamlet* also gives a historically specific twist to the domestic tragedy. For particularly striking about Olivier's *mise-en-scène* is that it focuses on an environment in which everyone spies on everyone else, in which no one trusts the other because everything is under suspicion. The characters are often visually framed by the arches of the cold stone castle Olivier has chosen as his setting, so as to suggest that they are claustrophobically locked into their respective emotional straits. In addition, characters are repeatedly staged at the vanishing point of someone else's gaze, sometimes unaware of the fact that they are being clandestinely observed. Then again, as when Hamlet confronts Ophelia with his demand that there be no more marriages, claiming his madness was caused by her wantonness, his passion is self-consciously staged for the eyes of those he knows to be hiding behind an arras, thus apparently beating the King at his own game of espionage.[1] Olivier also makes use of travelling camera shots, repeatedly circling around the empty throne of the dead king, gliding toward the queen's empty bed only to pass by quietly, or floating up and down the stone stairway that leads to the parapet at the top of the castle, where the ghost first appears. In so doing, Olivier manages to evoke an overriding sense that in this paranoid world characters not only clandestinely watch each other even while presupposing correctly that they are being watched. Rather the camera, haunting the scene as an invisible presence, itself serves as an agent of surveillance, whose source is unclear.

[1] All quotes are from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins. The Arden Edition (London / New York: Methuen, 1982).

While Lawrence Olivier may claim to take his cue from Freud's ahistorical reading, focussing on Hamlet's incestuous desire for his mother as well as his coming to grief over the Oedipus complex, because his own obscure sense of guilt paralyses his actions, the climate of conspiracy Olivier chooses as his setting also relocates Shakespeare's play within the cultural concerns of the late twentieth century. Along these lines René Girard has noted with regard to the strange void at the center of *Hamlet* that "the bizarre plots [the characters] hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying [...] make a good deal of sense as a description of an undifferentiated no-man's-land between revenge and no revenge in which we ourselves are still living".[2] The contemporary quality, which is to say the mid-twentieth century resonance, both Girard and Olivier attribute to Hamlet's hovering between action and non-action may well have to do with a continuing fascination for the paranoid rhetoric of repetition at the heart of a logic of conspiracy. Hamlet's theatrical passion is aimed at exposing the clandestine truth about his father's death by declaring the "Mouse-trap" on stage to be the "thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.600–601). Yet a choice between revenge or no revenge can only occur once Gertrude's and Claudius' response to a representation of the narrative of guilt he attributes to them serves as evidence that his suspicions are well founded. In other words, his interpretation of their response will not only confirm the suspicion he has already been harboring, but also locates proof in the realm of his inner perceptions, re-introducing doubt because these may be delusions. Furthermore, Hamlet is invariably locked not only into a logical short circuit, but also into a cycle of repetitions. What he has the players perform is not just "something like the murder of my father" (2.2.591). It is also 'something like' the story he believes to have received from his dead father's ghost. Lawrence Olivier highlights precisely the representationality of all evidence meant to support a logic of conspiracy by staging the dumb show as an exact repetition of the scene the ghost described to Hamlet in the first act. Both are clearly marked as the same cinematic versions so as to render visible that a narrative plot, allegedly exposing a domestic murder plot, is meant to fill a void in knowledge introduced by a contingent event of death. What Olivier's cinematic transcription emphasizes is that both are theatricalizations of a passion, namely a son's suspicion about the death of his father and the fidelity of his mother, grounded on the evidence of his own inward intuitions. Whether the narrative plot Hamlet privileges is accurate or not seems less

[2] René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 276. See Sigmund Freud's discussion of *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Standard Edition* IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 265–66 as well as in "An Autobiographical Study" (1935), *Standard Edition* XX (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), pp. 63–64.

significant than the fact that the production of a viable narrative is necessary in order for him to live and indeed for his enterprises to stop losing the name of action.

Linda Charnes has suggested that *Hamlet* might fruitfully be seen as "the first *noir* detective". Shakespeare's play, she argues, serves as "modernity's inaugural paranoid text" because "no one in this play 'knows' anyone else; and it is precisely this missing 'intersubjective' knowledge [...] that constitutes Hamlet as a *noir* tragedy".[3] To speak of *Hamlet* as an inaugural paranoid text means, on the one hand, highlighting that while Shakespeare's mourning prince seeks to confirm the knowledge he allegedly already has of Claudius' guilt, what we are presented with is an enactment of paranoia in the literal Greek sense; namely an abundance in mental activity that is in excess of its mark. This performance of 'over-knowing', furthermore, entails a hermeneutic act of radical re-codification. The surfeit in knowledge entails disclosing latent meanings of events that are opposite to their appearances, raising the question of whether the evidence he gains is knowledge he has or knowledge he wants, because it will serve his emotional needs in his mourning for his father. On the other hand, to speak of *Hamlet* in terms of textual paranoia and *noir* tragedy, implies the cross-mapping of two historical moments. For it entails reading the Shakespearean text within the frame of postwar anxieties, so as to discover in a Renaissance text the inaugural *energia* of conspiracy (in Greenblatt's sense of social energies) that has returned to haunt post-modernity. As Patricia Parker has argued, *Othello* and *Hamlet* reflect on "the sixteenth-century development of a nascent secret service", emerging from the historical junction "where an older language of divine or angelic intelligence [...] was being converted into the new lexicon of espial". These plays thus aesthetically refigure – as an epistemological hunger to see and to know – the "paranoid atmosphere of spying and being spied upon", the omnipresence of secret spies, of accusers and informants, obsessed with seeing and knowing 'privie secretes' prevalent at the time of Queen Elizabeth.[4] Implicitly then, treating *Hamlet* as an inaugural text of paranoia implies locating it within the concerns of our contemporary culture of conspiracy, to confirm that what concerns us is a repetition, or continuation, of a prior historical concern.

While my own argument is heavily in debt to the critical debate which has claimed that Shakespeare haunts contemporary culture, the historical cross-mapping I am proposing moves away from the question of phantomology, in order to ask what is

[3] Linda Charnes, "Dismember Me: Shakespeare, Paranoia, and the Logic of Mass Culture", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (Spring 1997), pp. 4 and 7.

[4] Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), pp. 233 and 257. It is worth noting that a climate of conspiracy in early modern English culture has been foregrounded in recent, especially new historicist criticism.

at stake in reading from the position of posteriority; of looking backwards in history to uncover an inaugural historical narrative of conspiracy that will confirm our own suspicions about a contemporary surfeit of narratives culturally exchanged to assure the production of a meaningful world.[5] If, in what follows, I propose reading the theater of passion displayed in *Hamlet* – the prince's revenge plot, Ophelia's hysteria – under the auspices of a code of conspiracy, I do so in order to explore the mutual implication between a modern subjectivity and modern skeptical doubt as this, too, finds its inauguration in Renaissance culture, yet as it also gains new urgency once it is reconsidered belatedly, from a position of posteriority. As Charles Taylor notes in relation to Descartes' skepticism, to argue that "this new conception of inwardness, an inwardness of self-sufficiency, of autonomous powers of ordering by reason, also prepared the ground for modern unbelief" is inevitably an anachronistic judgement.[6] Yet such looking back at history from the present allows us to both disclose an inaugural text for the paranoid subject, with its excessive hunger for seeing and knowing, as well as to look at the present from a position of the past, in order to uncover an inaugural text for the paranoid tone of contemporary hermeneutic practices like psychoanalysis and deconstruction. For, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the analyses they produce also feed on a proclivity to put any stable knowledge pertaining to the subject under suspicion, to privilege a hidden, latent meaning over manifest surfaces, to cultivate epistemological uncertainty and doubt. By anachronistically confronting Shakespeare's world of conspiracy with such contemporary analytic concerns, I follow Mieke Bal's suggestion that we might best practice contemporary historical inquiry by virtue of what she calls "preposterous history": an analytic reversal on the part of the critic, "which puts what came chronologically first ("pre-") as an aftereffect behind ("post") its later recycling".[7] According to Bal, this kind of revision, based on the notion of 'shared time' as an epistemological requirement, makes the claim that an obsession like Hamlet's with finding visual proof for a clandestine conspiracy, and the surfeit of narrative this produces, is defined by concerns that are both of today and then. In the particular case of *Hamlet* one might well locate the shared concern in the way mourning can take on the guise of paranoia. For

[5] See Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theater to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002), Anselm Haverkamp, *Hamlet: Hypothek der Macht* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2001), as well as Terence Hawkes, "Telmah", in Patricia Parker / Geoffrey Hartman eds., *Shakespeare & the Question of Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 310–332.

[6] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), p. 158.

[7] Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1999), p. 7. For a discussion of psychoanalytic criticism and its debt to skepticism, producing an analysis that puts what is the object of an analysis under suspicion, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Vor einem Bild* (München: Hanser, 1990).

even while, as Philippa Berry argues, Shakespearean tragedies delineate death "as a region whose opening perplexingly eludes the ocularcentric [...] desire to 'discover' [...] a formerly uncharted territory", it is precisely the gap in knowledge this evasion provokes which the mourner fills with the help of hallucinations – be they actual spectral emanations or fantasied scenes of betrayal.[8] Apodictically put, the concern defining both Hamlet's hermeneutics and contemporary conspiracy theories (including psychoanalysis) is an attempt to translate a contingent event like death into a meaningful story one can live by. In the following I will, however, take the "preposterous historical" cross-mapping I am proposing one step further, by introducing gender into the equation between mourning and paranoia. Because pitting Ophelia's response to her father's death – her histrionic display of a grieving mind, gone awry – against Hamlet's will allow me to disclose an alternative rhetoric of mourning; one that strikes through all categories of skeptical doubt in favor of immediate, unmediated action.

Doubting Woman

As Katherine Eisaman Maus persuasively argues, with Hamlet insisting on the impeachable validity of his internal experience of grief over external rituals of mourning, a two-fold disturbance comes into play. Privileging a true interior over a falsifiable exterior introduces alienation in the sense that a person's passions come to be "imagined as properties of the hidden interior, not immediately accessible to other people". However, positing such notions of a mysterious inward truth which can never fully be displayed not only entails doubt as to whether the perceptions of others correlate with one's own, but also "a troubling corollary suggestion about the limitations of the perceiving subject".[9] As a result, Hamlet's desire for a

[8] Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 82.

[9] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and the Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), p. 5 and 7. Verena Olejniczak Lobsien in her study *Skeptische Phantasie: Eine andere Geschichte der frühneuzeitlichen Literatur* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1999) reads *Hamlet* as an example for the way skepticism finds a congenial site in literature, beginning with the middle of the sixteenth century. Significant for her is the manner in which, faced with a receeding innerness of the self, these plays come to legitimate evidence by virtue of staging it. As she notes, "Für Hamlet ist vollends nicht mehr zu finden, was verborgen ist. Gleichwohl ist auch sein Tun in mehrfacher Hinsicht noch ein genuin topisches – etwa in seinem angestrengten Appell an das Gedächtnis (sein eigenes und das anderer) als dem Raum, in dem die Präzepte aufgehoben und die evidenzstiftenden Wissenselemente zu finden sein müßten, oder in der Art und Weise, wie er bestimmte Topoi theatralisch arrangiert, damit sie die unsichtbare Wahrheit hervortreiben. Aber was sich zeigt, ist nicht Gewißheit, sondern die Endlosigkeit gleichwertiger Interpretationen." (S. 107).

reliable means of achieving certainty comes to be pitted against epistemological qualms. Furthermore, Shakespeare's tragedy performs an epistemological desire, aimed at assuaging the gap between an internal truth and suspicious external manifestations, precisely as an externalization of the allegedly inaccessible inwardness; namely as a theatrical enactment of a self-investigation on the part of the mourner along with an investigation of the passions ascribed to those who share his world. Hamlet's initial doubt, which finds its ultimate confirmation in the appearance of the ghost – "I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come / [...] Foul deeds will rise, / [...] to men's eyes" (1.2.256–258), in turn produces the conviction that, because his skepticism endows him with the ability to look through the falsified exterior of his peers, he can see everything. His inability to understand both his mother's motivations for her remarriage and Ophelia's desire for him (because the inwardness of the other is by definition always inaccessible) transforms into an attempt to reconstruct this inwardness under the auspices of his own conspiracy narrative. Paranoid certainty casts them as the players in a script of hidden truths *qua* guilt he has devised and will now stage – taking the form of his histrionic displays of melancholic madness, of the "Mousetrap" and finally of the fatal duel with Laertes. As Maus laconically notes, evidence "is in the eye of the beholder". For "what the perceiver sees is determined by his own perceptual idiosyncrasies, not by what is 'out there'".[10]

This logic of suspicion, however, not only casts fundamental doubt on the evidentiary procedures in a tragedy such as *Hamlet*. Rather, it also brings into play a further disturbance. As Maus concludes "the problem is not just that people create their own monsters but also that monsters are really out there, though hard to find".[11] Much as Othello creates his Iago, Hamlet may be creating a murderous uncle, a faithless mother, a wanton lover, because "he waxes desperate with imagination" (1.5.87). However, desperate as he may be, Hamlet is also perspicacious in suspecting that something is amiss. Indeed, to look at Hamlet's enactment of skeptical doubt 'preposterously' in Mieke Bal's sense, which is to say in juxtaposition to contemporary discussions of conspiracy, allows one to foreground the fact that this surfeit of narratives involves two contradictory aspects. To believe in a conspiracy may well be an adequate response to the existence of an actual political intrigue (Iago's plot to destroy his superior officer, Claudius' plot to rid himself of a bothersome son-in-law). At the same time, conspiracy narratives may also be the result of a particular mind's proclivity to put all phenomena under suspicion, because it is guided by the general assumption that all external manifestations must be fallacious; a cover for secret motives. Significant, then, about skepticism's

[10] ibid., p. 125.
[11] ibid., p. 126.

celebration of doubt is that it contains, on the one hand, a healthy interrogation of the world, in an effort at addressing knowledge that is seemingly inaccessible. On the other hand, skeptical doubt may result in a belief in an all-embracing narrative that will eliminate all doubt; that will assuage the subject's epistemological fallibility by introducing the category of unequivocal belief.

It is, of course, this shift to a belief beyond (and untainted by) doubt which marks the fatality of the passion of skepticism that Shakespearean tragedies like *Othello* or *Hamlet* enact. For while it emerges that Hamlet's existence depends on his capacity to produce a meaningful narrative of his world, once this narrative becomes totalizing, it brings to the fore the very vulnerability of the autonomous self it is meant to assuage. Not only because, manifestly, he is living the text of another, namely the command of his dead father to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). But because, much along the lines of Stephen Greenblatt's argument for Iago, as Hamlet constructs a narrative of murder and hidden guilt, into which he inscribes those around him, he deals in probable impossibilities (that all women are unfaithful and treacherous) rather than improbable possibilities (that the death he mourns is contingent and not the result of a conspiracy, that the women have no secret motives, that Claudius feels no guilt when, for example, Hamlet finds him clandestinely praying).[12] From this one might deduce that if the vibrant and viable gesture of doubt subtending conspiracy thinking allows the skeptical subject to astutely suspect and then disclose actual clandestine power struggles, this attitude becomes paranoid (i.e. madly in excess), when the excess of the epistemological narrative produced aims at cementing suspicion once and for all, and as such aims at putting all further doubt under erasure. Like the Derridian *pharmakon*, skeptical doubt emerges as a two-faced drug, with the issue of healing or infecting a question of dosage. If, on the one hand, doubt can be the motor for insisting on the instability of knowledge, the existence of an inwardness that contradicts appearance, it can, on the other hand, result in an abundant display of doubt where certainty is gained by a belief in suspicion as the one and only epistemological key, under which everything not only can but also must be subsumed.

Such fundamental reassurance of the subject's ability to know the inwardness of others is gained at the price of a loss not only of the world (insanity), and a loss of one's loved ones (the production of corpses), but also a loss of one's self (death), and it is precisely this radical loss which, according to Stanley Cavell, is at stake in the scene of skepticism, as this is epitomized in Shakespearean tragedy: Completeness of belief (in Desdemona's untainted love, in Gertrude's maternal

[12] See: Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980).

loyalty) and perfection of doubt (in all women's fidelity) emerge as two sides of the same coin. Cavell reads the precipitous move from one to the other as an extraordinary representation of the "astonishment in skeptical doubt".[13] In doing so he draws on Descartes' suggestion in his first Meditation that, because there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep, what results is an astonishment allowing the subject to blur the boundary between experienced and dreamed realities. Yet significant for Cavell in any tragic subject's preference for dissolving his actual world into a trance, is that this choice is less the result of a conviction in a piece of knowledge than in an effort to stave off some knowledge too uncomfortable to bear. Applied to *Hamlet* (Cavell's concern is *Othello*) one might argue: To dissolve a particular woman and the inaccessible inwardness her alterity poses to the tragic hero into a dream, in which she is either unequivocally faithful or else her equally unequivocal faithlessness is proof that the time is out of joint, to undertake this transformation serves to cast the feminine character as the stake in a scene of skepticism that has nothing to do with the difference she actually embodies. It serves to stave off any intersubjective challenge she poses, which might well be tantamount to accepting that skeptical doubt can never be resolved, because alterity always defies secure knowledge as well as any complete absorption of another by the self. Within the dream of conspiracy Hamlet harbors, however, women can either assume the position of the beloved other, whose proof of integrity is the evidence for his own existence. Or, if he can convince himself that they are not to be trusted, then his very existence, and with it the world he inhabits, is radically put into question, but in such a manner that he does have one certainty, namely the unimpeachable validity of his suspicion of woman's innate proclivity toward sin. Any wish for certainty can only be achieved – thus the logic of Shakespeare's theatricalization of the scene of skeptical doubt – by dissolving a world inflicted by difference into a dreamscape, sanitized of all doubt, even if it is infected by the certainty that foul guilt exists. In this dreamscape one's existence is once again guaranteed by virtue of the fact that one can trust the beloved other, even if a paranoid re-encoding has occurred, as fidelity is recast into infidelity. One can trust the fact that one can't trust woman. All irreducible contingencies that keep the astonishment at the heart of skeptical doubt alive are transposed into a conspiracy of gender. Yet it is the consequences of this choice of not knowing, which, according to Cavell, plays like *Othello* or *Hamlet* ultimately force us to confront: "Tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences, or price, of this cover: that the failure to acknowledge a best case of

[13] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 128.

the other is a denial of that other, presaging the death of the other", and one might add, a denial of the human.[14]

Hamlet's Mourning

In *Hamlet*, the scene of skepticism and the astonishment of doubt inherent to it, finds a particularly poignant epitomization, not simply because Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia ("Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. [...] To a nunnery, go" (3.1.148–151)) presages the flower-decked corpse that will be drawn to a "muddy death" (4.7.182). Rather the abundance of corpses with which *Hamlet* ends can be seen as symptomatic of what Cavell calls "a conversion of metaphysical finitude into intellectual lack."[15] For these deaths give finitude to precisely the intellectual lack that the initial death of the father evoked in his son, repeating it, but in the sense of overturning it. After all, the event of death in general elicits radical skepticism *par excellence* on the part of any grieving survivors precisely because it produces a situation where epistemological categories no longer hold. An unwillingness to believe that a particular loss has actually occurred, and concomitant with it one's doubt as to whether the deceased is truly among the dead or still inhabiting the world of the living, thus emerges as the perfect setting for paranoia. For paranoia entails finding, or rather inventing, a narrative that promises respite from knowing what one just cannot not know about the inevitability of death. To be more precise, it allows one to stave off any knowledge of the contingency of mortality – its certainty but also its meaninglessness – by exchanging this for an over-abundance of hallucinated messages that make a given death abundantly meaningful, ascribing an agent (the foul uncle), a motive (treachery) and also a response (revenge) to this death. As Alexander Welsh notes, for a son who is unwilling to forgo mourning "the death of one's own father is a crime", and results in the son's willing there to be a ghost, for "his story of murder answers to the emotional needs of the hero just as surely as the play within the play". If Hamlet accepts willingly the specter's mandate of revenge, he does so because it empowers him in the face of the traumatic impotence a contingent event of death inflicts. Because it is easier to believe in a conspiracy than to accept the contingency of death. While "there is nothing one can do about the death of a loved person", Welsh continues, the suspicion of murder offers one the opportunity

[14] ibid., p. 138.
[15] ibid., p. 138.

for doing something, and thus endows one with agency: "Death suffices for mourning, but crime calls for punishment as well."[16]

Giving a different turn to the critical debate inaugurated by W. W. Greg in 1917, with its challenging argument against Claudius' guilt, I want to claim that at issue in *Hamlet* is not so much the question of how the father died (which never finds a conclusive explanation), than the fact that his death calls forth a passionate enactment of the son's suspicion that this death was a crime. The ghost's epistemological status may be nothing but "the shadowy embodiment of deep psychic disturbance", enacting the murky interface between "dream and reality, credulity and skepticism" as Greenblatt claims.[17] Yet what is certain is that this ghost, precisely because it incites a tale of conspiracy, not only activates doubt in the mourning son, but in so doing also offers Hamlet the psychic support that will shield him from acting upon his suicidal meditations. Rather than following his father into the realm of death, he returns the dead father to the living as he keeps re-enacting his conspiracy narrative revolving around a scene of foul murder – in the "Mousetrap", in his argument with his mother in her bedchamber, in the final scene, when he directly names Claudius' treachery, "Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane, / Drink off this potion" (5.2.330–331). Significant, then, about this paranoid re-encoding of the death of the father as crime is not only that it gives voice to Hamlet's feeling that this loss is an unjust violation in a metaphyiscal sense, but rather that it allows him to transform a contingent event into a purposeful act, for which not God but a fellow man is responsible. Taking up Cavell's suggestion that in Shakespeare's world "to exist is to enact, as if the basis of human existence is theater", one might wager that Hamlet's paranoid performance of murderous revenge, in the course of which he coerces those he suspects of complicity with this crime into assuming the roles he has designed for them, emerges as the one assurance he has of his own existence.[18] Because he can stage his engagement with death for the benefit of others, because he can enact his meditations on death, on culpability, and – primarily to Horatio – on the ability to act, he returns to the world from the liminal position between the living and the dead he had initially assumed after his father's death.

[16] Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in his Modern Guises* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), pp. 32f.

[17] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 154. See also W. W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination", *Modern Language Review* 12 (1917), 410–421.

[18] Cavell (1987), p. 187.

Fortinbras' Conquest

If we turn once more to the argument that notions of conspiracy can apply both to a political reality and to a paranoid attitude, Hamlet's investigations into an alleged crime open up a further dimension of meaning. The state of Denmark is actually "disjoint and out of frame" (1.2.20) since the death of Hamlet's father, not just because Claudius actually uses Polonius to spy for him, but equally because young Fortinbras has decided to march against them. Hamlet's investigation into the illegality of Claudius' reign, his conjecture that he is a murderer, can then be seen as a displacement not just of his Oedipal desire (to kill the father), nor his own death-wish (to kill himself in imitation of the dead father). Rather it staves off knowledge in relation to a different scene of death, namely that of war. This displacement seems all the more significant, given that the ghost – recalling as it does a scene of domestic treachery – appears under the auspices of this other threat of destruction. As the guards, standing on the platform of the fortified castle, explain, Fortinbras' decision to recover the land his father lost in battle, is "the source of this our watch" (1.1.109). From this one might surmise that the dead father's specter straddles two prior scenes of crime, the one political (the violence of territorial war), the other domestic (the violence of the mother's remarriage). If, however, we take the ghost to be the shadowy embodiment of psychic fears, then one might further surmise that the anxiety Hamlet privileges, namely his unwillingness to accept that the death of his father may have been contingent, is juxtaposed with an actual fear, namely the anticipation of Fortinbras' attack. While the former is grounded on the economy of skeptical doubt, the latter is grounded on certainty, much as Fortinbras functions as the diametrical opposite to Hamlet in his response to the death of his father. For he turns mourning into a narrative not of conspiracy but of conquest, whose course of action lacks all doubt. Might not Hamlet's suspicions about Claudius' and Gertrude's guilt be a cover for the war he knows for certain will come, with the enactment of his conspiracy fantasy inside the castle a counter-weight to the scene of war outside the castle? In the monologue about his "dull revenge" (4.4.33) he does read his own predicament – "I [...] that have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd" (4.4.56) – in relation to Fortinbras' "Exposing what is mortal and unsure / To all that fortune, death, and danger dare" (4.4.51–52), only to use his memory of the sight of twenty thousand dead to assure himself of the validity of his own murderous thoughts. Yet it also seems significant that to the end Hamlet privileges the domestic scene of violence, and with it the enactment of the scene of skeptical doubt, over the certainty of political violence. In dying he asks Horatio "Report me and my cause aright" (5.2.344), making sure that his friend will faithfully transmit a tale "of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts" (5.2.386) to Fortinbras. For we remain in the realm of

representations and anticipation. Horatio's testimony will, implicitly, be a repetition of the play itself, commemorating the paranoid world that has collapsed with the death of its protagonist. Hamlet's corpse, along with all the others, is proof not of the truth of the conspiracy he passionately enacted, but of the fatality of its effects; which is to say proof of the fact that while one may privilege a cover narrative to deny knowledge, one can't escape the consequences of this cover. At the same time it leaves the uncertainty over the status of his father's death fully intact.

Ophelia's Histrionics

There is, however, a second passionate scene of mourning, which, by bringing gender into the equation, also introduces a different engagement with death. As Alexander Welsh notes, "the two conversions of loss to suicide are Ophelia's act and Hamlet's mediations", only to add that the suicidal revenger's obsession with feminine sexual infidelity produces "a fiction that discovers adultery in the context of mourning and revenge".[19] The scene in Gertrude's bedchamber serves as the acme of the displacement of the mourning son's suspicion. Doubts about the lawfulness of his father's death and a desire to find proof for the veracity of the ghost's claim, are now negotiated as suspicions he harbors in relation to his mother's guilt, and by extension in relation to any woman's fidelity. The fact that, as Valerie Traub argues, "the threat posed by Gertrude's sexuality is paranoically projected onto Ophelia", because she merges in his mind with his mother, only confirms the value women as such have in his passionate self-enactment.[20] They are cast by Hamlet as the Other of doubt, because their difference, which is to say their separateness from him, is what his paranoid enactment seeks to cover over as he reduces both Gertrude and Ophelia to the question of their fidelity (of which he is either certain, or certain in his doubt). Yet they are also the Other of doubt in the sense that they may be appropriated by Hamlet's paranoid narrative but not contained in it. Of course in Shakespearean tragedy women repeatedly pay the price for the hero's denial of knowledge – be it in relation to mortality, to the fallibility of his symbolic position, or the veracity of his self-fashioning. Precisely because Ophelia, with her feminine performance of grief, which in the stagings of this play tends to be foregrounded, enacts the consequences of Hamlet's paranoid

[19] Welsh (2001), pp. 51 and 54.

[20] Valerie Traub, "Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays", in Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps eds., *Shakespeare and Gender: A History* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 122.

projections, by putting an end to the logic of displacements feeding his revenge plot, she can also be seen as functioning as a corrective to his dream of conspiracy. After her father is killed by Hamlet in place of the uncle he suspects of murder, she turns first the self-alienation and then the death he denies onto herself. While Hamlet, uncertain about the cause of his father's death, externalizes his mourning so as to find evidence that murder has occurred, she, certain that murder has been committed, uses her own body as the stage on which to perform a far more radical break between fallacious external appearances and her inner anguish, rendering the latter visible by virtue of an excessive lament that no longer fits the socially acceptable rituals of mourning. Her enactment of grief is deemed by her brother to be "a document in madness" (4.5.176) precisely because she juxtaposes a description of her father's burial with a charming discussion of the power of herbs. In so doing she defies the paranoid logic embraced by the rest of the court, according to which external appearances are meaningful because they point to but cover over a hidden meaning, by emitting utterances where surface (charming nature descriptions) and depth (the passion of affliction) are placed contingently next to each other. Her hysteric enactment of grief also circles around doubt, yet in a way that moves beyond any mental oscillation between certainty and uncertainty. As a gentleman explains to Gertrude, lamenting the death of her father, she:

> speaks things in doubt
> That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
> Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily
> (4.5.7–13).

While her hearers agree that her utterances are meaningful, they cannot know what she means. Ophelia performs what one might call semiotic contingency, because though her affect is perfectly transmitted, the words she uses could mean anything or nothing. The case can't be decided. Her language of hysteria can, thus, be read as one instance where her enactment of grief marks the limit of Hamlet's conspiracy fantasy, because while his paranoia feeds off an abundance of narrative energy (too much meaning), her hysteria performs a zero-point of narrative; the moment where symbolic meaning collapses, where to decide whether something means too much or too little has become irrelevant.

At the same time she also refuses the role of being the privileged stake in Hamlet's conspiracy fantasy in another sense. Not only does the lewd language of her mental

alienation perform what he suspects her of, namely sexual openness. Her lack of restraint is a public self-display that, because it includes everyone, no longer really includes anyone, and can, therefore, not serve as a support for his personal paranoid fantasy. Rather she uses first her hysteric performance of grief and then her suicide to enact the death he only meditates on. As René Girard argues, "Hamlet must receive from someone else, a mimetic model, the impulse that he does not find in himself."[21] Ophelia's suicide can, then, be read as the act of passion that discloses the vacuity of his perennial indecision. When he declares to Horatio, "the readiness is all" (5.2.218), he can do so precisely because Ophelia's corpse, dramatically embraced by him at the graveyard, has inspired him to finally take action. I would, therefore, claim that, far from being reduced to being an instrument in her father's and her lover's conspiracy plots, Ophelia emerges as a figure of radical action precisely because of the ethical nature of her embrace of death. While Hamlet's paranoid skepticism induces him to cultivate epistemological qualms, Ophelia's hysterical skepticism strikes through all epistemological categories. While Hamlet, in the course of seeking evidence, comes to cement his belief in a global explanatory key, which subsumes everything, regardless whether it actually applies or not, Ophelia transposes all radical doubt about the coherence of the world (evoked by the murder of her father), into an immediate response. Because she not only uses her body, but indeed her life as mode of expression, her enactment of mourning moves beyond all explanatory narratives to perform their nullity. Or put another way, Hamlet tries to transform the crisis, called forth by the contingency of death, into factual proof, while Ophelia directly confronts the crisis mortality poses by re-enacting it on her body, cementing not a narrative of doubt, but the irreversibility of death.

As Hamlet has recourse to a narrative of conspiracy meant to cover this traumatic knowledge, he discovers that he cannot escape the consequences of conspiracy, with the dead bodies of its victims serving as evidence of the very irrevocability of death which, in order to deny, he had recourse to a paranoid narrative in the first place. Ophelia, by contrast, doesn't even want to escape the consequences of the choice not to know about the contingency of mortality which Hamlet's theatricalities have brought into motion. Indeed, she seeks to externalize that which his passionate histrionics were meant to cover; namely that death can never be subsumed into a narrative, whose aim is to cover over the discrepancy between fallacious exteriority and an inaccessible inwardness, because it falls out of the frame of representation. Set against the multitude of corpses Hamlet produces so as to prove the veracity of his conspiracy narrative, Ophelia's self-produced corpse functions as evidence that not only can no one escape the consequences of a

[21] Girard (1991), p. 276.

paranoid plot aimed at covering up the knowledge of death's contingency, but that the cover itself is all too fragile. Like the death of Hamlet's father, Ophelia's suicide takes place off stage, so that a description of her corpse is brought to us belatedly. Gertrude's narrative, however, is clearly not a hallucination, returning the dead to the living, but a commemoration accentuating demise, not least of all because the scene she describes is one of quiet but irrevocable disappearance; "But long it could not be / Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death" (4.7.179–182). I find it compelling that Ophelia's is the one corpse we don't just not see, but that, as in her mad speeches, it conjoins passionate affliction with lyrical beauty. In questions of death, Ophelia seems to instruct us, we don't need to choose between the ideal and the monstrous, because death is both, before it is nothing.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag macht den Versuch, das in *Hamlet* vorgeführte Theater der Leidenschaften – Hamlets Rache und Ophelias Hysterie – in bezug auf den Code der Verschwörungstheorie zu lesen. Dabei werden die gegenseitigen Implikationen der modernen Subjektivität und des skeptischen Zweifels deutlich. Zugleich geht es um die Frage, in wie weit Hamlets Verdacht, sowohl gegen Claudius als auch gegen Gertrude, ihm zur Sicherheit eines Glaubens wird, der ihn vor radikaler Skepsis schützt und die Kontingenz des Todes ausblendet. Ophelias hysterische Trauer wird der von Hamlet zur Schau gestellten Verschwörungsphantasie kontrastiv gegenübergestellt. Indem sie den Tod ausagiert, über den er nur reflektiert, antwortet sie auf seine paranoide Logik des radikalen Zweifels mit einer radikalen Handlung, die man einen ethischen Akt nennen könnte, da sie das Wissen um den Tod nicht ausblendet sondern anerkennt.