This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal for Cultural Research on 14/11/18, available online:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14797585.2018.1545451

Literary Clinical Practice: Desire, Depression and Toxic Masculinity in *Hamlet*

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Abstract

This essay introduces the notion of a literary clinical practice for which it remains essential to continue to consider those texts that open up a place for a readership, or audience, or even a civilization to consider the endlessly generative failure of its literature to write mental health. Concerned with mental illness that is an effect of language on the subject, the body, and of the enigma of the truth as cause, psychoanalysis is the crucial interlocutor for any literary clinical concern with the maladies of literature and society. In order to re-assess the utility of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to contemporary problems such as depression – perhaps the dominant symptom of our time – this essay attempts a reconsideration of Jacques Lacan's famous seminar on *Hamlet* from the perspective of the contemporary clinic of the Lacanian orientation in psychoanalysis led by Jacques-Alain Miller.[1]

I *Literary clinical practice*

Is it possible for literary criticism also to be a form of clinical practice? The idea is not new – indeed for Gilles Deleuze this is necessarily the case when criticism addresses great authors like the Marquis de Sade or Leopold von Sacher-Masoch whom he finds are like doctors in the 'profoundly original clinical picture' that they produce in their fictions. (Deleuze, 1989: 15; see also Deleuze, 1998) Critical engagement with these and other literary diagnosticians over time ought to continue to enrich these clinical pictures in the context of the history of symptomatology and the changing understanding of pathologies up to the present. But is this really possible given the radical disjunction that we currently see between the sciences and the

humanities? Perhaps physicians can glean something useful from literary accounts of illness, particularly a historical understanding of its lived context. But surely literary critics have nothing to contribute here without the most up-to-date medical knowledge of the biological etiology and nature of disease. Science progresses, we are assured, it doesn't look back to archaic notions and nostrums. Certainly not to Shakespeare's choleric and blackly bilious world of the Medieval and Early Modern apothecary.

Given its scientific ignorance, does literature – even contemporary literature – have anything other than historical significance? Some time ago, the UK government decided to cut all funding to Arts, Humanities and Social Science subjects at University in order to open them to market forces while protecting Maths, Engineering, Science and of course Medicine. This testifies to the decline in the importance of the Humanities; it is non-essential. The decision concurs with Steven Hawking's view that science is all we need to answer the big questions of philosophy, and the latter can fight for its survival among the other idols of the marketplace. Darwin has long displaced Shakespeare as the touchstone of National Genius in the UK. Moreover, transferable literary skills are becoming less important as the need for human word processers is projected to decline rapidly as white-collar robots take over the task of information exchange.

Literary authors like Shakespeare remain important historical figures, but their legacy can be sustained in national archives and the main centres of elite culture like Oxford and Cambridge, the Ivy League and heritage sites like Stratford. Logic suggests that Shakespeare does not need to be anywhere else. Indeed, the suspicion remains that as a major element of the core high school curriculum, the historical remoteness and perceived difficulty of studying Shakespeare means that he functions as a gatekeeper to ensure that the right students from the right schools get to the right universities, in the process convincing all the other children that elite English culture isn't for the likes of them. Furthermore, if we take the claims of science and its advancement seriously, then literature can produce no new knowledge about life, nature, the cosmos and humanity's role in it. Shakespeare has nothing to offer. The acknowledgement that science and its method is the only means of knowledge production is evident in the rise of quasi-scientific approaches to the Humanities in the work of academics producing varieties of, for example, 'cognitive literary criticism' and 'evolutionary literary theory' which look 'to the

cognitive neurosciences for finer-grained descriptions of the workings of language, consciousness and subject-formation than those supplied by influential but inadequate post-structuralist theories'. (Richardson, 2007: 553) But if the idea is to save the Humanities by imitating certain social-scientific methods, it is doomed from the start because its object, the manifest image of the conscious, language-defined speaking being, is itself unscientific. Ever since the post-linguistic turn of the 1980s and the rapid development of cognitive neuroscience, scientists have become increasingly sceptical about the utility and even reality of 'top-down concepts, such as thinking, consciousness, motivation, emotion, and similar terms', doubting that they 'can be mapped onto corresponding brain mechanisms with similar boundaries as in our language'. (Buzáki, 2006: 19) The eliminative materialism of Paul and Patricia Churchland that famously denounced and rejected the 'folk psychological' mysticism of conventional concepts related to human cognition, belief, memory and emotion (Churchland, 1998: 3) has become fundamental. In the goal to eliminate all intervening psychological concepts and reduce human thought and behaviour entirely to physiology, hormonal levels or neurochemistry, language is an obstacle, and indeed a malady for the creature that deludes itself through thinking and speaking with it. Cognitive psychology is by-passed at this point and disclosed as a pseudo-science that posits a 'conceptual nervous system' consisting of 'quasi-physiological' concepts that do not stand the test of physiological reduction (see Mandler, 2007: 171-2). They remain inextricably linked to natural languages that are pre-eminently the accumulated archive of misperceptions, misconceptions, biases, discriminations, intolerances, exploitations linked to ancient superstitions, myth and narratives that are grounded in a history of civilizations that proceed from domination to domination, each one saturated in blood. Natural languages are hopeless vehicles for learning, incapable of producing appropriate neuronal activation vectors and in the context of serious scientific study need to be eliminated. Folk psychology is simply bad theory that results in the bad human behaviour we see all around us and should be replaced by a theory based in the grey matter of the brain, an eliminative materialist 'successor theory'. (Churchland, 1998: 35)

As a kind of apotheosis of folk psychology, Shakespeare's plays are often credited with a power of shaping modern subjectivity, but as such they can just as easily be regarded as filled

with atavistic notions, beliefs and prejudices that from a modern perspective are clearly anti-democratic, racist and misogynist. Either way, by common consent, Shakespeare's plays have become part of the common sense understanding of human perceptions, pathologies and self-understanding to the point where they have become clichés. As such, Shakespeare forms a significant blockage to learning and to human development. Shakespeare remains the pre-eminent spectral repository of dead human concepts and zombie categories. Perhaps it is time we moved on from Shakespeare. Out vile jelly.

A contemporary literary clinician could not but agree, at least in the first instance, with the Churchlands. It can only concur with science on the delusional and deleterious effects of language. Indeed, this is its very starting point because literature is the writing of the essential pathology of that being that is spoken by language. Literature never ceases not to write the health and wellbeing of that body that is the site and threshold of its catachrestic mind, locus of misnamed perceptions, affects, thoughts and memories. Literature is the narrative of the failure of public order to write the rules on 'mental health' that registers the contingency of those disordering encounters with the real that impel attempts to inscribe new social constructions and new relationships. For literary clinical practice, then, language can only be approached paradoxically as an internal obstacle, a parasite that afflicts the existence of the creature that it only partially brings into being as a subject of speech. (Lacan, 2005: 95) As the clinical practitioner Miguel Bassols affirms, there are, properly speaking, no language disorders because 'language itself *is* the disorder … It is because language itself is a disorder of the real that we can uphold that everyone is delusional'. (Bassols, 2013: 105) Consequently, literary clinical practice needs must contend that that it is only through addressing the operation of language that its effects on the speaking being can be assessed. And that furthermore, the trauma caused by language is manifested with more reality in the writing of the body than it is in an image taken of the brain. (see Cottet, 2013: 121)

At the time of writing, there is in the UK a profound 'crisis of mental health' to such a degree that it was announced in the government's financial budget of October 2018 that 'every school and hospital casualty unit will have its own dedicated mental health team in a £2 billion funding boost to tackle the epidemic of eating disorders, depression and self-harm among young

people'. (*The Times*, 29.10.18: 1) Specifically teenagers and young adults are targeted, schools and universities having been hitherto required to absorb the funding gap with their own pastoral counselling, health and wellbeing services, something noted by Matko Krce-Ivančić in his essay 'Governing Through Anxiety' in this issue of *Journal for Cultural Research*. As his title and essay suggests, these services have a very normative and economic understanding of their role correlative to the notion of mental health generally. As literary clinical practitioner Jacques-Alain Miller writes, 'there is no other definition for mental health than that of public order'. (Miller, 2011: 73) The category of mental health is a subset of public order that bears particularly on the subject of rights and legal responsibility, and of course on its social and economic utility. 'Mental health has the primary aim of the integration of the individual into the community'. (2011: 74) When a significant proportion of its population is committing suicide and disabling itself through disordered behaviours, a government needs to act and restore order. It is doubtful, however, that the aims and objectives of such a restoration bear on the reality of the problem of mental illness particularly when it might well be the conditions of the community and its mode of integration – including its school, university and health service – that is contributing to the problem in the first place.

Perhaps there is still some use for Shakespeare in his profound understanding of the pathologies of communities, notwithstanding the good intentions of pastoral services in their dedication to mental health. 'Denmark is a prison', states Hamlet, (2.2: 242) in a play in which we can still recognize the lineaments of what from the perspective of a modern nomenclature we would call depression, self-harm and even eating disorders. Denmark is a prison in which the disorder of Hamlet's subjective state is both conjoined and in conflict with the community into which he is being dis-integrated. He has that in common with some young adults in the twenty-first century. In what follows I am going to argue that these symptoms that we believe are new are related to a particular failure of desire that we see staged in *Hamlet*. For literary clinical practice, it remains essential to continue to consider those texts that open up a place for a readership, or audience, or even a civilization to consider the endeavour and endlessly generative failure of its literature to write mental health especially as it continually re-stages this site for subsequent generations. The only analogous practice, a paradoxical science of the mind

and civilization for which mental health is not a concern, (Miller, 2011: 75) is psychoanalysis. Concerned rather with the mental illnesses and disorders that are an effect of language on the subject, the body, and of the enigma of the truth as cause, psychoanalysis is the crucial interlocutor here in any literary clinical concern with the maladies of literature and society.

II *Desire and its Interpretation in Reverse*

In order to assess the utility of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to contemporary problems such as depression – perhaps the dominant symptom of our time – I propose to attempt a reconsideration of Jacques Lacan's famous seminar on *Hamlet* from the perspective of the contemporary clinic of the Lacanian orientation in psychoanalysis led by Jacques-Alain Miller. In relation to the new symptoms of the twenty-first century, this clinic orients itself particularly from the perspective of the late Lacan of the 1970s. (See Voruz and Wolf, 2007). Lacan's Seminar VI on Desire and its Interpretation comes however from the 'classic' period of Lacan of the 1950s. Nevertheless, I contend that it is possible to see the outline of the structure of the contemporary clinic of foreclosure in its 'ordinary' dimension that provides the framework for the understanding of contemporary symptoms. (For the classic account of foreclosure see Lacan, 1993, and its contemporary iteration in Miller, 2009) These symptoms do indeed concern a failure of desire.

'If the tragedy of Hamlet is the tragedy of desire', Lacan asks at the beginning the 19th session of the Seminar (Wednesday 29 April 1959), 'it is time to notice … that from the beginning to the end of *Hamlet* there is talk of nothing but mourning'. (29.4.59 / 1) Even if it wasn't clear in 1959, the year of the Seminar, it is evident now that when Lacan asks if the tragedy of Hamlet is the tragedy of desire, he doesn't mean that this is a tragedy caused by desire, by *hybris* or some kind of over-reaching excess of desire. On the contrary, the tragedy concerns the death of desire itself. Here is a pre-sentiment of an era in which desire has become archaic, of a time when desire will no longer have a place, no longer be appropriate. And when Lacan mentions mourning, subsequently, he doesn't mean that there is mourning, but that there is 'nothing but talk of mourning', that is to say of the failure of mourning, or perhaps a mourning for the broken

and abandoned rites of mourning. Further, since Lacan's conclusion at the end of Seminar VI is that *desire is its interpretation*, then this is also a tragedy of interpretation. Yet further still, since it is unconscious desire that is both the cause and engine of interpretation, then we also see in Lacan's account of *Hamlet* the conditions for the eclipse of the concept of the unconscious.

It is the unconscious which interprets -- not primarily the analyst. The analyst simply attempts to track the processes of condensation and displacement, metaphor and metonymy, employed by the unconscious. The dream and the parapraxes are the unconscious's interpretations of the desire for the lack that it hides 'in order to make light of what it does find'. (Lacan, 2007: 61) Interpretative deciphering is just another form of enciphering that is undertaken by the unconscious in order to satisfy its jouissance in its own way. Since interpretation always calls on another interpretation and so on in an interminable process it has to be regarded as ultimately delusional and disenabling, the treatment becoming 'stuck' in the satisfactions of *jouis-sens*. This is why, according to Miller, 'the age of interpretation is behind us'. (2007: 3) Interpretation is delusion; it has the same structure as madness. The age of interpretation is behind us therefore in the context, as Lacan stated in the late 1970s, that *we are all mad*, *that is to say delusional*. (See Miller, 2013: 20) This is the tragedy of desire and its interpretation: we are all mad (that is to say delusional, but not necessarily psychotic). But as we have seen, from the perspective of science in its fully eliminative, mathematical form, there is no discourse that is not a semblance. Psychoanalysis is a discourse that might not be a semblance to the degree to which its starting point is that outside of mathematics no strict distinction between knowledge and belief is sustainable, even as in the course of an analysis the shimmering of truth might be revealed in the absence of knowledge. (See Miller, 2016: 14)

In Lacan's Seminar on *Hamlet* can be read the co-ordinates of the terrain that he will subsequently explore as he develops his teaching into the 1970s, teaching that responds to the changes in the clinic that are an effect both of the paradoxical success-in-failure, or failure-in-success of the post-Freudians, and the change in Western society in the late twentieth century concerning the lifting of a mode of repression, that psychoanalysis itself had helped to bring about. This has resulted not just in the decline of the paternal Ego-Ideal, but also the failure of

the Name of the Father to function in its traditional role of securing a social bond connecting family with society and nation, and a shared sense of what post-patriarchal societies think of as reality. Second, from around Seminar X, Lacan decisively replaces the Oedipus complex with the concept of the *objet a* as the clinical compass for interpretation; third, the continued supplementation of the *object a* in the attempt to account for jouissance that results in the clinic of the *sinthome* by which the registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real might be knotted, again in the context, finally, of 'the topological erasure of the place of exception in the constitution of speaking beings'. (see Voruz, 2010: 424)

In short, for the contemporary clinic of the Lacanian orientation led by Jacques-Alain Miller, this means that analytic interpretation needs to be put 'in reverse' in order to think the 'symptom from the fantasy' (rather than the other way around), and most importantly involves the necessity to abandon the structure of neurosis as the standard diagnostic model in favour of psychosis, that is to say to think neurosis from the perspective of psychosis. It is important to think of neurotic symptoms as a particular way of stabilizing or managing a situation in which psychosis is the norm. Indeed, government by the 'norm', as it is understood statistically, may itself be evidence of a generally psychotic condition.

Returning to Lacan's interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is possible to see something of this structure of general or indeed depressive madness already in place. Lacan states quite explicitly that everyone – not just Hamlet or Ophelia – in Elsinore is mad. Everyone is in the grip of a collective madness as an effect of the death of the King, and just as importantly, the failure of the rites of mourning. The death of an essential being produces, Lacan suggests, a hole in the real that produces a signifier that is nothing other than the signifier of the lack in the Other, a signifier that indicates the place where it is missing. It is a 'semblant', essentially, like the Ghost of old Hamlet of whom we have no idea, no idea whether he's a spirit of health or a goblin damned. 'This is a signifier', Lacan says, 'whose accent makes the Other powerless to give you your response … it is because this signifier finds its place there, and at the same time cannot find it, because this signifier cannot be articulated at the level of the Other, that there come, as in psychosis – and this is the way in which mourning is like psychosis – to proliferate all the images

that the phenomena of mourning give rise to'. (Lacan, 1959: 22.4.59 / 13) Lacan will later nominate this proliferation of the semblants of the *nom du pere*, as '*Essaim* or the 'swarm'. (See Lacan, 1999: 143) 'The phenomena', Lacan goes on, 'in the foreground being those through which there is manifested not one or other particular madness, but one of the most essential collective madnesses of the human community as such, namely that which is put here in the forefront, given pride of place in the tragedy of Hamlet, namely the ghost, the fantome, this image which can surprise the soul of each and everyone of us.' (22.4.59 / 13)

Perhaps one can put the interpretation of *Hamlet* in reverse by reading Hamlet's symptoms, including his neuroses – and there are so many of them, as Lacan points out, one minute he's hysterical, then he looks classically obsessional, not to mention his oscillation between mourning and melancholia – in the light of collective madness. He has it all going on, as only a truly fictional character could, functioning as Lacan suggests as 'a vacuum for situating … our ignorance.' (18.3.59 / 7) As the history of Shakespearean criticism testifies, the mania for interpretation has sustained Hamlet (both the play and the character) as a symptom of national cultural neurosis. It is true that interpretative desire has waned, giving way for the most part to historicist forms of scholarship, notably the attempt to excavate ever more instances of collaboration, thereby producing a swarm of Shakespeares, turnitin-type search engines turning up textual evidence of Fletcher, Beaumont, Marlowe, Middleton and so on. Meanwhile, leaving aside the logic of not reading or producing Shakespeare at all, given his historical remoteness and cognitive irrelevance, current criticism along with production approaches Shakespeare as a semblant of national culture both negatively and positively. Turning Shakespeare into something positive requires his plays to be re-read and re-cast in a motley of diverse colours, races, sexes, genders, abilities and so on in order to promote inclusivity. Moreover, it is in pursuit of this agenda of the social sciences, that Shakespeare's plays in recent productions broach the discontents of contemporary society manifested in pathological symptoms – especially *Hamlet*, of course. Productions and related new plays interrogate Shakespeare directly from a contemporary perspective; Alice Birch's *Ophelia's Zimmer* (2016) is one excellent example.

III *Ophelia and toxic masculinity*

Birch's Anglo-German play is based on *Hamlet* and played at the Royal Court in 2016 directed by Katie Mitchell. The '*zimmer*' of *Ophelia's Zimmer* isn't a walking frame but the German word for a small bedroom into which Ophelia is confined, as if in a prison cell. She has become isolated from the rest of the play, all-alone, and like Tom Stoppard's *Rosancratz and Guilderstern Are Dead*, Birch's play looks at *Hamlet* from a marginal perspective. In this case from Ophelia's perspective, the focus being Hamlet's ill-treatment of her. In a journalistic piece on the play, Holly Williams of *The Daily Telegraph* asks, 'is Shakespeare Sexist?' (19.05.16) In her promotional interview with Williams, director Katie Mitchell answers in the affirmative. She says of Shakespeare's play that 'its gender politics are outdated and offensive.' '"If you just take the five scenes [Ophelia's] in, it would be a short play about abuse,"' further suggesting that the play 'licenses misogyny.' (19.05.16) Mitchell is here echoing the official 'blurb' or publicity release for the play which states: '*Ophelia's Zimmer* asks whether there isn't something toxic and deeply misogynist being dragged through history on the coat tails of heroes like Hamlet, Romeo and Macbeth, something that may still be influencing our own modern-day gender relationships.' (see www.schaubuehne.de/en/produktionen/ophelias-zimmer.html) If Shakespeare's play licences, promotes and perpetuates misogyny then surely productions of *Hamlet* should cease. While the *Telegraph's* Williams agrees with Mitchell's view, she either fails to appreciate its logical conclusion or avoids it, happily concluding instead that this just makes the play all the more relevant and 'wincingly true, even today. That's the genius of Shakespeare, after all: his works still speak to us.' (19.05.16)

I do not refer to *Ophelia's Zimmer* and this review just because it is topical in the light of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the MeToo campaign. I mention it because obviously its central assumption concerning Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is true. Furthermore, it concurs with Lacan's reading of *Hamlet* in two important ways. Most obviously, Lacan's reading stresses the absolute importance of Ophelia's role, and Hamlet's appalling behaviour. But second, there is also the importance of her isolation as a signifier of what we must now call Hamlet's 'toxic masculinity'. About the 'misogyny' and 'abuse', Lacan is emphatic. He re-iterates the importance of attending to this throughout Seminar VI. Hamlet's misogyny, what Lacan calls his 'horror of femininity' is condemned along with his verbal attacks as both 'cruel' and 'contemptible'. (Lacan,

1959: 4.3.59) Unlike Mitchell and Williams, however, Lacan does give an account of this turn in Hamlet's attitude and behaviour. Mitchell seems to regard it as unexceptional, simply an example of a problem inherent to masculinity that connects the seventeenth century to today.

Birch's play focusses on just the five scenes in which Ophelia appears in *Hamlet*, and emphasises her continual suffering. Beyond the parameters of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet continues to 'stalk' Ophelia, sending her threatening messages and offensive tapes. Ultimately, as the promotional material suggests, the play wants us to contemplate what 'the bloated dead body of a young girl floating in a river really looks like'. In her own review in *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner, wrote, 'anyone expecting a feminist reclamation of Ophelia that allows her to take centre stage and remake and change her own story may be disappointed.' (18.05.2016) Birch's play offers up Ophelia as a victim with whom we are invited to identify and share her pain.

As Lacan of the 1950s contends, interpretation is informed by desire. While interpretation remains essential to psychoanalysis, contemporary 'analytic interpretation' should not be regarded 'as the revealing of a latent content, but an orientation given to a discourse by adding something that gives it sense … Truth has to do with the sense one chooses to give something, and that this sense has to do with one's desire.' (Voruz, 2010: 429). It is important what sense an analyst chooses in her engagement with the jouissance of the interpretations of the unconscious. Psychoanalyst Véronique Voruz gives the example of

> a patient [who] may come in to complain about the very real suffering he has experienced at the hands of others. The analyst can either commiserate or choose to steer clear of the narrative of suffering. Both senses will be 'true', but the effect will be entirely different. The first attitude is a response to the demand of the subject that saturates his lack with a deleterious satisfaction, confirming his identification with a pathologized position. The second attitude, by contrast, can help the subject recognize that he plays a part in the ills he complains of. … if the analyst's desire is for the possibility of desire in the patient, then she has to take the risk of not satisfying this demand. (Voruz, 2010: 430).

There is no evidence in *Hamlet* the Ophelia is complicit in her suffering – quite the contrary. However, in so far as Mitchell's production of *Ophelia's Zimmer* invites the audience to contemplate the spectacle of a woman's isolation, suffering and bloated corpse, the play is perhaps less opening a site for the emergence of feminist desire than feeding a demand for a morbidly satisfying mode of identification. More complicit, certainly, is the *Telegraph*'s journalist Williams for whom 'abuse' is now another signifier of Shakespeare's timeless genius. For her it seems, Shakespeare was first to discover a particular type of masculinity that 'has not disappeared like doublet and hose'. (19.05.16) In her interview, echoing the official blurb, Mitchell lets us know what type of masculinity Shakespeare is representing in the form of Hamlet. It is something very 'toxic', she says, 'which licenses awful interactions between men and women in our society today'. (19.05.16)

'Toxic masculinity', is not a phrase that comes from Shakespeare, but it could be an emblem of *Hamlet*: the image of Claudius's poisonous serpent crossed with his poisoned rapier begin and end the play, though Hamlet old and young are the victims not the agents of this toxicity. The attribution of toxic masculinity, with which Birch and Mitchell give a new sense to Shakespeare's play, evidently comes from social science discourse. It is derived ultimately from psychology, in its traditional alliance with juridico-medical discourses, that names various character traits associated with 'hegemonic forms of masculinity' or 'traditional male forms of behaviour' such as 'dominance, devaluation of women, self-reliance and the suppression of emotions'. (see Matsos, 2018; Parent, Gobble and Rochlen, 2018) The strong silent type, perhaps, although Hamlet's loquacity is famed. But as in *Hamlet*, the bad behaviour of 'toxic males' can also affect the mental health of young women. (see Jenny, Deinera Exner-Cartens, 2018) Terry Kupers has shown how toxic masculinity is rife in prisons in the form of both inmates and guards, posing a significant barrier to 'mental health treatment'. (Kupers, 2005) Accordingly, toxic masculinity is also associated closely with substance abuse, stress, depression, suicide or death by lung cancer or cirrhosis of the liver. Evidently, the hegemonic formation of this personality trait is also demonstrated by a powerful commitment to the oral drive as a locus of disorder.

But even as toxic males may take their own lives, or disable themselves to the point where they die of the over-consumption of toxic substances, toxic men also find themselves represented in literature. A cursory web-search disclosed a wonderful blog post on Bustle.com by Charlotte Ahlin listing *The 14 Most Toxic Male Characters of All Time*. And yes indeed, Hamlet is there at number 3 in the charts with a poisoned rapier, if not a bullet. He's higher than some pretty mean characters. Higher than Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* (6), higher than Ramsey Bolton from *Game of Thrones* (13) and Nabokov's paedophile Humbert Humbert who surprisingly comes in bottom of the list at 14. Top of the toxic pops is Emily Brontë's character Heathcliff. Ahlin doesn't offer any criteria of toxicity, but writes of Hamlet nevertheless that,

> Shakespeare is pretty well-versed in writing toxic dudes. King Lear is a pretty classic Bad Dad. Othello murders his wife over a misplaced handkerchief. But Hamlet is kind of... messing with Ophelia for *fun.* Look, sure, he has a lot going on, but he's verbally abusive to Ophelia for no dang reason, except that he's mad at his mom. Ophelia's madness isn't entirely Hamlet's fault ... but he was a total asshat and then he killed her dad, so it's not *not* his fault. (Ahlin, 2018)

This is brilliant, and moreover – unlike Williams or Mitchell, Ahlen actually offers us a reason for Hamlet's bad behaviour. He's 'mad at his mom', which, it turns out, is the same reason that Lacan gives. As we know, Lacan significantly re-models Freud's suggestion that it is Claudius's achievement of Hamlet's unconscious Oedipal wishes that provides the stumbling block for Hamlet. For Lacan, however, there is no logical reason why killing Claudius should be a problem. Killing Polonius, not to mention dispatching Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths shows he's toxic enough. Claudius has cleared the way, and Hamlet can justifiably kill Claudius and thereby gain sole possession of his mother with a perfectly clear conscience. 'It is not the desire *for* his mother', Lacan famously claims, 'but the desire *of* his mother' that is the problem. (18.3.59) It is the enigma of his mother's desire that frustrates Hamlet, and makes him mad at her, a madness that he displaces on to Ophelia.

Ophelia is the first to note Hamlet's subjective disintegration in what Lacan calls her 'clinical observation' of his state of mind directly after he has seen the ghost. (15.4.59 / 13-14.) What she describes is a body event that Lacan suggests is the 'first phase of estrangement' of

Hamlet's 'depersonalization' and collapse of desire. 'We are not forcing things in designating what is happening at that moment as properly pathological'. Commenting on the 'necessary correlation between the sentiment of one's own body and the strangeness of what happens in a certain crisis, in a certain rupture', Ophelia dissolves as Hamlet's love-object. All that is left is a stain of (self)disgust that he finds mirrored in the femininity represented by Ophelia to which he directs his sarcasm 'in this style of cruel aggression … pushed to such an extreme which makes of it one of the not least strange scenes in the whole of classical literature.' (15.4.59 / 13-14.) The implosion of Hamlet's desire has nothing to do with Ophelia; but she becomes its collateral damage, as the American military would say. The real problem is the absence of the desire of Gertrude.

IV *The rejection of the 'being spurned'*

'It is in the name of "mother"', writes Lacan, 'that Hamlet rejects Ophelia in the fashion which appears in the play extremely sarcastic and extremely cruel.' (4.3.59) And the problem is not simply that faced with the choice of a worthy object and a bad object, the 'Hyperion' of his father versus the 'mildewed ear' of his uncle, Gertrude does not choose, does not indicate the nature of her desire. In her failure to choose she indicates not only that she has a complete lack of interest in the qualities exhibited by Hamlet's father, but that as such in psychoanalytic terms *she has no desire at all*. Gertrude is unmoved by Old Hamlet's looks – his Classical curly hair, his forehead of Jove, his eye of Mars; she's indifferent to the seal of marriage and his name. Lacan suggests that when Hamlet addresses her in the name of the father, at the level of the code of the law, and the order he represents, he receives no other reply than:

> I am what I am, there is nothing to be done with me, I am a real genital character … mourning means nothing to me. The funeral meats served the following day for the wedding banquet, thrift, thrift – the remark is Hamlet's. As regards her, she is simply a gaping cunt. When one goes, another arrives. This is what is in question. (18.3.59 / 15)

Foregoing both the dimensions of the imaginary and the symbolic, Gertrude is only interested in the real of the drive and its genital satisfactions. If not the cause of foreclosure, Old Hamlet clearly failed to 'name the lack' and provide a metaphor for the void of maternal demand,

thereby establishing the conditions for a standard psychosis to trigger at some point. In the place of the lack constitutive of desire there is an unbuttoned indefinite series of supplementary satisfactions, one after another, without limit. Desire is the desire of the Other, but Hamlet discovers that for him, there is no desire of the Other. 'He has no further desire', Lacan writes; 'Ophelia has been rejected' because she has become suddenly 'the very symbol of the rejection as such of his desire'. (22.4.59) It is this as much as the failure of public mourning rituals represented by the 'funeral baked meats' coldly furnishing forth the marriage tables that is the cause of Hamlet's depression. This social failure certainly seems to be a condition of the private experience of depression, even now. In his book *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholic and Depression* (2008) Darian Leader suggests that the personal awkwardness of contemporary grief that is bound to the relative lack of public ritual forms the backdrop to many states of depression that actually indicate an underlying yet unacknowledged state of mourning or melancholia. Hamlet arrives from Wittenberg to discover that his mother has quickly moved on from the death of his father, having successfully replaced him, perhaps even having prepared for the eventuality in advance. For Leader, depression is a blanket term for a variety of different types of symptoms often related to an instance of singular loss that was not adequately mourned, internalized yet unacknowledged, disavowed or repressed. So, while someone may say 'I am depressed', writes Jacques-Alain Miller, 'there is no way the meaning you give to depression is the same as your neighbour's.' (Miller, 2013: 18)

Along with the problem of mourning rituals, for Jean-Louis Gault depression is the dominant symptom of contemporary 'hypermodern civilization' because it is conditioned by a response 'to the fading of desire, and the too much of satisfaction.' (Gault, 2011: 103) Specifically for Hamlet, if we follow the reading of Freud that is modified by Lacan, Hamlet's depression would be produced because his unconscious Oedipal wish concerning the death of his father has been satisfied before he has a chance to address it, the spectacle of his mother's satisfactions providing the gloaming horizon of his fading desire. Rather than desire, Gertrude represents the drive that promotes the object of satisfaction above all else. The drive of course requires signifiers, objects, and it is interesting that for Lacan it is economy that shapes the genital drive of Gertrude here in place of the symbolic. We have a libidinal economy involving

series and number, 'when one goes, another arrives' without apparent discrimination or limitation.

The contemporary clinic of the Lacanian orientation is currently organized by the concept of ordinary psychosis, which is an epistemic rather than diagnostic category. It is the 'tentative nomination' of two traits of Western modernity: first, the reduction of the master-signifier to number; and second, the substitution of the 'not-all' for the 'all' as the matrix of the social bond, in which the set of the social is not defined by an exception, but a series developing without limit or totalization. (see Voruz, 2010: 424; and Milner, 2010) We live in Gertrude's world, albeit technologized in which the choice of objects is automated by selection and search algorithms predicated purely upon what came before. People who bought *Hamlet* also bought *American Psycho*, *Game of Thrones*, *Wuthering Heights*. On the basis of your prior purchase data, social media likes, what you've clicked and what you've passed over, it knows you better than you do, and can offer you objects before you've even had the opportunity to articulate a demand. Desire is thus foreclosed. Tinder discloses that 80% of literature students really like toxic males. People who swiped Hamlet, also swiped Heathcliff, Ramsey Bolton, Humbert Humbert … (See also Hess and Flores 2016 on toxic masculinity and Tinder)

The expectation for the machine of ubiquitous and predictive computing is that it learns everything about us, rendering 'data subjects' entirely transparent and predictable. Digital code is thus assumed to be able to anticipate and absorb all of jouissance if not now, then in the future as part of the apparatus of the discourse of the master that makes everything work. In some respects, this apparatus remains the ideal of the social science project of diversity. Facebook had 71 categories of gender and sexual identification, for example. The social science model is also predicated upon the set of inclusivity that would be without exception, comprised of trans-sectional series stretching into infinity in a will to absorb all jouissance. It is infinite because impossible. It is impossible for any signifier, even binary code, to absorb all jouissance because the signifier is the very cause of jouissance – in all of its toxicity. The toxicity of the Other's jouissance demands that the banquet of inclusivity be striated with segregations, more

often than not by demands for so-called safe and protective spaces, and as an effect of self-reinforcing social media echo chambers. (See Brousse, 2017)

There are also those toxic ones who are rejected from the banquet of diversity on the basis of their own formula which for Lacan is precisely that of 'being rejected' or 'being spurned'. Lacan addresses this in Seminar XIV, *The Logic of Fantasy* from 1966, wherein the notion of 'being spurned' which would be 'the principle of behaviour, of the attitude of certain subjects – on a "being spurned by the mother"'. The spurning summons of this being spurned is an effect of 'the masochistic desire that the subject would create, at the level of the oral drive, which would permit him to bewail this injustice and find jouissance in it' (see Miller, 2002: 14) – the oral toxicity of which Melanie Klein would presumably have much to say. For Lacan, this is one of the instances in which the 'unconscious is politics' – although he was apparently thinking at the time of the Vietnamese who were inexplicably rejecting the banquet of American capitalism.

The neurosis of the being spurned looks a little like Hamlet whose desire is rejected by his mother, and who finds in Ophelia the very symbol of that rejection, and indeed that isolation. And yet, it will be precisely on the basis of identification with Ophelia as that impossible signifier entirely in isolation, that he rediscovers his desire, precisely as impossible. He discovers she is dead. In a mourning reflected in the rivalry of Laertes, he then seeks to incorporate the object of their mourning by entering the hole in the real provoked by that loss, figured in the play by the freshly dug grave into which Ophelia has been laid. The struggle in the grave of course pre-empts the final scene in which Hamlet becomes Laertes's poisoned foil. Fatally wounded, already dead and entirely toxic, Hamlet can at last go to work. Pow Pow Pow. (See Botting and Wilson, 1997)

V *The signifier of perplexity*

The moment of Ophelia's total isolation, then, as a signifier-all-alone, is the situation that Alice Birch makes as her *mise-en-scene* in *Ophelia's Zimmer*. It is an appropriate scenario to evoke because it is on the basis of her isolation, apparently in madness, that Ophelia enunciates her mad or half-mad discourse that casts flowers poisoned with barbs and symbolic indictment at the King and the Queen. Ophelia accuses Claudius of seducing or raping her and taking her

virginity: ‘Let in the maid, that out a maid / Never departed more. (4.5.53-4) In the process she coins her own definition of toxic masculinity, ‘Young men will do’it if they come to’t / by Cock, they are to blame’. (4.559-60) Well before Hamlet’s poisoned foil arrives at its destination, then, delivering Claudius his own message in reverse form, Ophelia discloses to anyone prepared to listen what is rotten at the heart of Denmark. Is Ophelia actually mad, or is she following Hamlet’s example in putting on an ’antic disposition’ so that she can speak truth to power? Echoing his father’s ruminations on the method in Hamlet’s madness, Laertes says much the same thing about his sister’s discourse: Ophelia’s so-called ‘nothing [is] more than matter’. (4.5.172)

According to Gertrude, Ophelia was preparing more floral missives when she accidentally drowned, and was therefore rendered silent. Gertrude offers a suspiciously detailed account of her death; perhaps she was present. After all, Ophelia has only just, two short scenes before in the play, accused her of conspiracy to murder, speaking through the symbolic language of flowers. Following the accusation of Claudius’s seduction (signified by daisies), Ophelia hands Gertrude some columbines, associated with ingratitude and marital fidelity. (4.5. 176) Gertrude reports that Ophelia was drowned along with her flowers, ‘down the weedy trophies and herself / Fell in the weeping brook’ (5.1 146), her heavy garments slowly pulling her beneath the surface to her death. It seems to me this level of detail, coupled with the motive – following the public scandal of The Mousetrap and the attempted assassination of Hamlet – suggests that the play is offering the possibility that Ophelia was murdered. Perhaps she was pushed in the brook by some henchman while Gertrude looked on, scattering the seditious flowers upon her. It is not a view commonly aired in the history of Shakespeare criticism, but it is strange that the account of accidental death is subsequently changed to suicide without any evidence – a sign or note would be conventional – being discovered. The suicide is signalled by further ‘maimèd’ funeral rites, allowed by the Priest for whom the nature of the death is ‘doubtful’. (5.1. 207).

Ophelia’s doubtful suicide is an enigma which in turn leads back to the enigma of her discourse. In the clinic of the Lacanian orientation interpretation in reverse means that we move from ‘the path of elaboration’ to ‘the path of perplexity’, although there is no entry to the latter

without first walking the path of the former. Advancing in this other dimension of interpretation, Lacan appeals to *Finnegans Wake*, namely to a text which unceasingly plays on the relations between speech and writing, sound and sense, a text woven of condensations, equivocations, homophonies, which surpasses the cyphering jouissance of the Freudian and classical Lacanian unconscious. In it every quilting point is rendered obsolete. This is why, despite heroic efforts, Joyce's text lends itself to neither interpretation nor translation. In the discourse of his 'antic disposition', Hamlet is adept at these kinds of Joyce-signs, but so in her own way is Ophelia. More interesting than her suffering, I would suggest, is her signifying cunning, both verbal and gestural. As part-speech, part-song, part-encrypted floral indictment, Ophelia's discourse remains a signifier of perplexity, like Hamlet mad only north-north west yet pertinent to the southerly matter in hand: 'a document in madness'. (4.5. 175) Laertes marvels about how well Ophelia speaks of 'thought and affliction, passion', turning 'hell itself' to favour through her clinical verse. (4.5.184)

Ophelia and Hamlet are both embroiled in the xenopathy of a discourse of power and impotence. It is a discourse in which the sexual relation continues not to be written, the consequences of which remain toxic. But Ophelia manages to do something with the nonsense that precisely grounds this xenopathy of language, interpreting the signifiers and symptoms of her predicament in her own way. She has no opportunity to lodge them under the multiplying categories of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as 'depression', 'bi-polar disorder', 'suicidal behaviour disorder' or – coming soon – 'toxic femininity'. She does not have the possibility of locating herself on a spectrum by which she might measure her degree of divergence from some kind of biometric or biopolitical norm. Instead she applies her own form of literary clinical practice, signifying her predicament and that of her community in an adept performance of poetry and the language of flowers.

As the expression of 'the invariant occurrence of singularity of each and every subject', (Voruz, 2010: 439) literary clinical practice is the art of speaking and writing well. And few wrote as well as Shakespeare whomever or how many he is.

NOTE

1. This is a version of the paper I gave at the 'Lacan and Shakespeare' symposium hosted by the Kingston Shakespeare Seminar at Garrick's Temple 07.04.18. Thanks to Catherine Belsey, Matthew Biberman, Peter Buse, Penny Georgiou, Keith Hanley, Makiko Pinkney, Timo Uotinen and Richard Wilson among others for questions, comments and suggestions.

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