‘Heaven and earth! /Must I remember?’: Memory and Melancholia in *Hamlet*

Hamlet is a figure of profound melancholia. Freud defines the condition in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” as a psychological state of pathologized mourning in which the melancholic undergoes ‘an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.’[1] This diminished sense of self manifests in the melancholic becoming a historical being, unable to move on from the lost object. ‘Object’ is used by Freud as a verb, so it applies equally to a person as well as a physical entity. The loss of this object causes a state of mind which exists in perpetual mourning and a self-debasing world-view. Hamlet’s regular mourning process is interrupted by his entrance into a state of melancholia, trapping him in the shadow of the lost object; his father. Through physical manifestations of his memory, such as his father’s ghost, the skull of Yorick, and Aeneas’ speech performed in act two, Hamlet is symbolically trying to reclaim the lost object. In mourning, Ophelia also attempts to retrieve the lost object by displacing memories of her father and childhood onto the ballads she sings, as well as the flowers she carries in act four, scene five. In spite of these numerous attempts at semi-tangible manifestations of memory, the text ultimately concludes with a failure to reinstate the whole self. Through *Hamlet,* Shakespeare argues for the essential fallibility of human memory; retrieving the lost object—and by consequence, the lost self—is a futile task, even when attempted through the projection of memories onto symbolic entities.

The Ghost of Hamlet is the first exposition of young Hamlet’s memory projection, and the action that follows from the command to ‘Remember me’ indicates the inevitable failure of memory.[2] The Ghost as a semi-corporeal being does not only exist in Hamlet’s mind, but in the world, as his presence is calibrated by Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus. It nevertheless also exists as a manifestation of Hamlet’s memory, as Hamlet is the only one who is allowed to hear the Ghost’s revelation; thus one cannot abandon the potential for the Ghost’s monologue being intertwined with Hamlet’s own inner voice. While the Ghost is real, it is also a medium through which Hamlet is attempting to reclaim the lost object. His melancholia confounds his ability to take action because he is so wrapped up in his contemplative and obsessive-compulsive

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[1] Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1917), 246.

[2] All quotations from *Hamlet* in this essay are taken from *Hamlet* (New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2016), ed. Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor.

memories. Reclamation of the lost object is rendered impossible, particularly because an essential part of the self is also vanished:

> The patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradiction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.[3]

Just as Freud argues that the lost object is often the melancholiac's own ego, the lost object of Hamlet's father has transformed into the lost object of his self. The Ghost's first speech to Hamlet follows a strange progression, beginning with the indictment to 'Avenge his foul and most unnatural murder!' and ending with 'Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me' (1.5.25, 91). The progression from revenge to remembrance blurs in the prince's mind as the play continues, and he becomes unable to differentiate between the two commands. This is catastrophic for Hamlet because his delay of action causes him to feel as though he has not only forsaken the Ghost, but actually abandoned his father's memory altogether.

The Ghost is a temporal being since he disappears from the play after act three, scene four, and is never seen nor spoken of again. The last time he presents himself is in Gertrude's closet, in the scene immediately following Hamlet's accidental killing of Polonius. When the Ghost appears to young Hamlet in this scene, his mother cannot calibrate its presence causing Hamlet to become desperate for her to hear and see it, 'as if he senses that his own memory traces are at stake.'[4] The fact that Gertrude cannot sense the Ghost terrifies Hamlet because he knows his memories and grief have dulled over time; the diminishing intensity of the Ghost's presence indicates that Hamlet's own memories must be declining. He is further removed from his father's spirit by the end of the play, when in the moment of finally killing Claudius, Hamlet is not even concerned with the afterlife of Old Hamlet, but rather the spirit of his mother:[5] 'Drink off thy potion. Is they union here? /Follow my mother' (5.2.310-11). When Hamlet completes the single task he intended to accomplish since the first act, he has entirely forgotten the Ghost of his father.[6] This is perhaps the clearest indicator that the Ghost's innate temporality represents

[3] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 245.
[4] Stephen Greenblatt, "Remember Me," in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 225.
[5] Stephen Greenblatt, "Remember Me," 227.
[6] Ibid.

the futility and ultimate failure of the act of remembering. Immediately after Hamlet enacts his revenge, it kills him. The Ghost, as an entity of his memory, could not save him from the same deadly fate that befell his father.

In act two, scene two, Hamlet asks the players to perform a speech from a play he once heard and loved. He says, 'If it live /in your memory begin at this line' and then ironically, proceeds to forgets the opening phrase (2.2.385-6). This misremembering hints at the ultimate fallibility of memory, even in the event of performance. Hamlet quickly resolves his forgetfulness by then speaking for another long, thirteen lines, attempting to prove to the players, and also himself, that his memory has not failed him entirely. At the end of these lines, he asks a fellow player to continue on, despite knowing the text very well himself. In requesting someone else to continue the speech, he situates himself in the role of Dido to observe the action from an intimate proximity.[7] This slight but comfortable distance from the performance enables Hamlet to use the speech as a projection of his memory of the lost object. The speech addresses Pyrrhus's failure to avenge the death of his father on Priam's family during the Trojan war, despite having the need and desire to do so: 'Like a neutral to his will and matter, /Did nothing' (2.2.419-20). Hamlet wants to observe the monologue not only because he enjoys theatre, but also to possibly experience some release and purging of his own pain by listening to a speech that mirrors his own situation. Unwittingly, enduring this speech has the opposite effect he desires. Rather than providing an emotional release, the speech only reminds him of what he has lost, as well as his failure to act. This subsequently results in Hamlet's resentment at the performer's ability to emote in contrast to his own stunted mourning process:

> What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do
> Had he the motive and that for passion
> That I have? (2.2.494-7)

Hamlet has been prevented from mourning his father's death on numerous occasions, the first of which is in act two, scene two, when Claudius describes Hamlet's mourning as 'unmanly grief' (94). Grieving is deeply intertwined with femininity in *Hamlet*, and Claudius shuns him for this association with the feminine. That Old Hamlet is a figure of masculinity is implied in various ways, but initially through his first militaristic appearance as the Ghost where he wears his battle

[7] ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, footnote 2.2.384, to *Hamlet*, p. 296.

armour (1.1.59-60). This comment from Claudius to Hamlet not only prevents the latter from grieving as a son, but also indicates an even greater separation between the memory of his father and his own identity, which is now grounded unpleasantly in the feminine.

Hamlet's interrupted mourning transforms him into a figure of melancholia, and it is precisely the latter condition that disrupts his ability to act. Hamlet projects his failure to act and the resulting self-deprecation he experiences through the speech. Hamlet reproaches himself for not being committed strongly enough to his cause:

> Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
> Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
> And can say nothing. (2.2.501-4)

Hamlet parallels the previous line that Pyrrhus 'Did nothing' in saying that he himself 'can say nothing.' He perceives that revenge is more closely related to the truth being shared via utterances and speech, rather than the sole act of killing Claudius. Just as Hamlet equates revenge with remembering, he too equates revenge with performance, so the act of 'saying' is what really matters, and yet he is still unable to communicate the truth of his father's murder. His failure to speak is what truly torments him. Through the witnessing of performance in *Hamlet,* Shakespeare indicates that the attempt to recover the lost object will always be futile.

The skull of Yorick is another significant memory object for Hamlet. As there is no way of knowing for certain if this skull did truly belong to Yorick, it functions rather as a symbol for a childhood turned to dust. By simply holding the skull in his hands, Hamlet is prompted to the recollection of childhood bliss and simplicity, but his memories of youth are tainted by subsequent expressions of anxiety surrounding the inevitability of death. As Hamlet ruminates on the futility of life, he is prompted to think of two of the most powerful men to have ever lived as also being of dust and bone: Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Death is the ultimate equalizer, as the latter two are compared with Yorick, who was a mere court jester. While memories of the living are what differentiate between and make meaningful the dead, this is not enough for Hamlet. Instead, he concludes that recollection is a failed act of reinstatement; the dead will remain dead, and the lost will remain lost, regardless of whether or not they are remembered.

The act of remembering necessarily disrupts time, even if only for a brief moment, as the mind is thrust into recollection of the past. For the melancholiac, this interrupted sense of time is

pathological as the individual is perpetually stuck in the feedback loop of memories of the lost object. The graveyard is the perfect setting for melancholia because it is a physical space in which boundaries between the living and the dead become permeable and obsessive memory seems to establish a line of communication between past and present. As the gravesite is being prepared for the burial of Ophelia, Hamlet's 'non-time' is revealed as the deaths of Yorick and Ophelia appear to be happening at the same moment, rather than the supposed twenty-three years in between (5.1.163-4). Time's linearity is relinquished by the melancholiac, who only sees the dead as dead, and the living as living. Hamlet longs to preserve the memories of his father and childhood in the skull of Yorick, but he is simultaneously all too aware that the skull is made of dust, and he too will be returned to the earth after death. Through the failure of this memory object to provide Hamlet with any assured sense of self and purpose, Shakespeare makes it clear that his childhood is too far gone to reclaim any of its lost joy. The act of remembering will not return the lost object—or the ego—no matter the attempts made to preserve it through external entities. Shakespeare advises through *Hamlet* to accept object-loss because nothing can or will bring it back. It is imperative to learn how to move on with life, as Hamlet exemplifies the consequences of not doing so and thereby being trapped in the shadow of the lost object until it ultimately kills him.

Ophelia is also a figure of deep mourning for a brief period after the death of Polonius, a loss compounded with the absence of her brother, Laertes, who is in France, and the estrangement and rejection of her love, Hamlet. Ophelia, as in the case of Hamlet, has lost a significant part of her identity along with this object-loss. In her last conversation with Laertes (after she has already begun her descent into madness), she disregards his words and instead sings pieces of ballads that both signify and embody her memories of her father and childhood. This symbolic act of regression represents a last impulse to retain her sense of self through memories of a happier time, preceding her object-loss. In addition to these ballads as projections of Ophelia's memory, she employs another memory-object in act four, scene five: her bouquet of flowers. It is unclear whether these flowers exist as physical objects or if they are only imaginary, but they nevertheless function to the same end. To Laertes she gives, 'rosemary: that's for remembrance' (4.5.169). Her own memories are failing, made evident in the fragmented nature of her songs and speech, thus embodying them in the rosemary enables her brother to carry these memories with him and allow them to persist, even when they disappear

from her own recollection. She also gives him 'pansies: that's /for thoughts' (4.5.170). In this contextual usage, 'thoughts' relates to sad thoughts, or melancholy.[8] Not only is Ophelia symbolically sharing her memories with Laertes, but she is also dispossessing her state of mind. This is the greatest act of embodiment of which she is capable, and it enables her personhood to be metaphorically absorbed by Laertes after her death. However, these songs and flowers are both temporal objects, since they are ultimately unable to reinstate a security of self for Ophelia. She drowns after crafting 'fantastic garlands' out of flowers on the side of the brook, symbolizing her last—and fatal—attempt at symbolically reinstating the lost object (4.7.166).

By the concluding scenes of *Hamlet*, it is clear that the enactment of revenge fails to bring any real satisfaction to Hamlet or even the play's audience, since death was always an inevitability for the prince, regardless of whether or not he would have succeeded in killing Claudius first. Physical manifestations of memory—such as the Ghost, Yorick's skull, and Aeneas' speech—constitute Hamlet's attempts to preserve the self that he lost in his state of melancholia, which is ultimately futile because for him, death is the only end to melancholia. With the end of this unsatisfactory revenge narrative comes the sense that a greater failure is equally at play; memory is unable to preserve the self once it is lost alongside the value-object. So why does Shakespeare make so many attempts in the figure of Hamlet, and even Ophelia, to utilize the projection of memory onto physical entities as a way of preserving selfhood? One is left at the conclusion that attempts at reclamation through recollection is a human impulse. Like Sisyphus and his boulder, so too is Hamlet obligated to a life of remembrance, no matter how futile or perpetual these efforts may be.

Word Count: 2579

[8] ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, footnote 4.5.169-78 to *Hamlet*, p. 417-18.

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