Gertrude, Ophelia, Ghost: Hamlet's Revenge and the Abject

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T. S. Eliot intrigues me in the following passage from his famous essay entitled "Hamlet and His Problems." He does so because while pronouncing the play "an artistic failure" due to the dissonance between dramatic representations of Gertrude and the disgust she arouses in Hamlet, Eliot serendipitously opens up another critical entry that can take Hamlet's equally troubled relations with other characters into account: "*Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of *some stuff* that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize."[1] Later Eliot does localize this "some stuff" even more pregnantly as "the inexpressibly horrible" that Shakespeare wanted to reveal but could not.[2] Though his own term lacks "an 'objective correlative'" with which he admonishes Shakespeare in the above-noted essay for the Gertrude characterization,[3] Eliot's very act of noticing "some stuff"—this "inexpressibly horrible"—is salutary, giving a fresh center from which to reread *Hamlet*.

By asking why Hamlet is aroused to react in turn with fear, desire, contempt, and disgust—not only towards Gertrude, but also towards Ophelia and the Ghost—I hope to show that Hamlet's "problems" lie in his epistemological dilemma spurred by the material manifestations of "the inexpressibly horrible." It is also my hope that his sense of the horrible becomes intelligible with the assistance of Julia Kristeva, who explores the corporeal authority of abjection in her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*—a treatise built in part on Freud's maternal figure as a taboo, in part on Mary Douglas's anthropological insights about boundaries and the role of the body in society, and in part on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of outsiders.[4] It is fortuitous that the terms "horrible" and "horror" are etymologically cognate. Such linkages help in reconfiguring Hamlet's horrors of Gertrude, Ophelia, and the Ghost into those of his ever-shifting symbolically-prescribed threefold self—that

of the prince, the son, and the lover—because such self is founded upon his disquiet about feminine sexuality, "the maternal" body, and the general materiality of the human body.[5] In the end, Kristeva's theory clarifies Hamlet's "problems" as those of an outsider's epistemology.

Thick theoretical threads weave Kristeva's abjection, but the most guiding for my rereading of *Hamlet* are those concerned with the imaginary borderlines and "the speaking subject's"—i.e., symbolic self's—relationship to these borders.[6] Namely, what may exist on either side of the border is the key element to Kristeva's abjection. She writes that abjection is that which "disturbs identity, system, or order" and thus threatens stable subject positions.[7] Since abjection does not respect "borders, positions, rules," the full constitution of subject positions requires a clear demarcation line between the space of the subject and what is not the subject's, namely, the other's.[8] This redrawing of boundaries and spaces creates the subject's sense of security, of what's inside and what is outside the boundary of the self. This horror of abjection is caused as much by the physical repulsion at the other as by an additional knowledge that

> abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.[9]

Kristeva means that abjection does not exist outside the subject in the sense that it has emanated from the subject's acknowledged symbolic self and order, be it biological, social, or spiritual. Although the specific nature of the border changes from one experience to another, the work of abjection remains the same: to bring about an encounter between symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.

One of the primal abjective borders, as hinted at in the preceding passage, is the materiality of the feminine, especially "converging on the maternal" body as the sexualized other.[10] Kristeva explains this point in this way: In our psychosexual development, partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful oneness with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of "a

chora, a receptacle,"[11] that is, the ideal state of fusion in the womb between mother and child prior to the child's individuation. But, as the child separates from the "*maternal* entity" and enters "the symbolic realm" or law of the father, the child experiences its mother as an abject and begins to recognize a boundary between "me" and the "mother," between "I" and other.[12] When we as adults confront the abject, therefore, we simultaneously fear and identify with the mother as both repellent and fascinating, provoking us into recalling a state of being prior to the law of the father where we feel a sense of helplessness. However hard we try to exclude the abject mother, she still exists since the other is that which is outside the self and within the self at the same time. Abjection is truly an intolerable state of being because the maternal causes the recurring, threatening sensation of an instable self, signifying "a kind of *narcissistic crisis*" wherein "when I *seek* (myself), [I] *lose* (myself) . . . then 'I' is *heterogeneous*"; it is a state wherein "I" must question the integrity of my own self.[13]

Equally important in Kristeva's scheme is another border that materializes in what she calls "a 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" since this "something" partakes of "the improper and unclean."[14] Kristeva remarks that we recognize one such border-drawing other at the sight of certain foods, vomit, body fluids, human wastes and, most of all, the corpse, toward which we feel revulsion and abhorrence. Such somatic reactions occur, moved by our psychological reactions of "repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting." Through these, we redraw an imaginary "boundary of the self's clean and proper body . . . a border between two distinct entities or territories. . . between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human."[15] In our symbolic and spiritual experiences, we abstract such biological "repelling" into "a rite of defilement and pollution."[16] During the performance of the rite, we renew the original contact with the abject, then we repel it as an "*exclusion* or taboo," a "*transgression* (of the Law)," or as "a threatening otherness."[17] We feel urged to perform such a cathartic rite of repelling because the otherness exists "where meaning collapses," most typically in forms of bodily pollution or the breaching of taboo social practices. Otherness as abjection breaks down meanings and causes the generic loss of distinctions that nurture these foundational distinctions—whether a distinction is between culture and nature, subject and object, I and other, life and death.[18]

From the foregoing theoretical gleanings, the genesis of Hamlet's problematic relations with Gertrude, Ophelia, and the

Ghost may be re-imagined in his horrified new knowledge of them primarily as figures of abjection. In an illuminating association to Kristeva, Hamlet's first soliloquy plunges us into the play's subtext of abjection where a transgressive border-crossing by the abject maternal body—and its extension, the female body—is foregrounded. Since Ernest Jones read Hamlet as an Oedipal-complexed youth, Hamlet's relation to the maternal has often turned on a psychology complete with Freudian repressed infantile fantasies and adult son's fears and revulsion of what Janet Adelman named Gertrude's "maternal malevolence" and her "uncontrolled sexuality."[19] A Kristeva-leavened reading of *Hamlet* encourages not so much revising such views of Gertrude as augmenting Hamlet's complex filial stance towards the disorganizing materiality of her body, now authorized as both a repulsive and a desired place.

Thus it is with the revelation of Hamlet's horror of this repulsive mother-as-power that the first soliloquy begins. "Repellingly" lamented is Gertrude, who does not know the borders of the self, originating in her fertile and deadly generative body with which she has collapsed the whole meaning-making paradigm of "all the uses of this world" (1.2.138).[20] What sounds like Hamlet's death wish—"O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (1.2.133-36)—in fact articulates his unspeakable horror and revulsion of the "rank and gross" maternal power that would "disturb identity, system, order" of the symbolic (1.2.140). Immediately following, therefore, is Hamlet's more private horror of "Maternal authority," which, according to Kristeva's premise, "is distinguished from paternal laws within which . . . the destiny of man will take shape."[21] His symbolic identity, inscribed in his princely and filial status, is founded on and maintained in King Hamlet's transcendent paternal order and law.

Now that she has effaced that proper boundary by means of the shifting of her body from "my poor father's body" to "incestuous sheets" (1.2.152, 162), she has become a threat to "the totality of his living being."[22] In order to reclaim his "clean and proper" male body,[23] he redraws boundaries by performing a verbal ritual of repelling because pure speech is associated with the symbolic male body and "like culture, sets up a separation and, starting with discrete elements, concatenates an order."[24] His language, expectedly, is underpinned with the reassuringly foundational distinctions between the transgressive mutable maternal ("an unweeded garden," "nature," "earth," "this,"

"appetite," "most unrighteous tears," "satyr," "a beast," "incestuous sheets," "increase," "grown," "fed," "speed") and the transcendental ideal paternal ("Everlasting," "God," "His canon," "a king," "Hyperion," "heaven," "father," and "reason") (1.2.135-54).

In the process of so recapturing himself, Hamlet's horror of Gertrude's body escalates, I think, by an additional unwelcome knowledge that she in effect helps both to subvert and convert his father's paternal order by willingly subordinating herself to the new symbolic order through the seemingly acceptable, but in reality defiled, form of marriage ("this" [1.2.143]) to Claudius; she had put herself "outside . . . [and] beyond . . . the rules of the game,"[25] and blurred the line between what she should be as his mother and for his father and what she chooses to be with Claudius. Indeed, his double horror is engendered because she can maintain the integrity of the former symbolic status of a queen mother, whereas his own is now quite ungrounded, just as Claudius's deconstructing public address to him in the preceding scene—"But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (1.2.66)—has demonstrated.

While marriage in itself represents an ideal social practice, informed by the paternal rules of inheritance, economics, and considerations for order in society, for Hamlet, Gertrude's "marr[ying] with my uncle" with "most wicked speed" (155-56, 161) constitutes a prohibited marriage and thus a commission of a taboo, and points towards the delusive nature of the former "arrangements of knowledge" that would have allowed for his familiar, stable identity of prince and son to continue.[26] "Maternal authority" is to set up an archaic borderline between the "I" and the other, its mother, according to Kristeva. Her body is to signify a boundary of "that mapping of the self's clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws."[27] Yet, Gertrude seems intent on reincorporating herself into the body of Claudius ("With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" [1.2.162]), who, even if Hamlet does not yet know about Claudius's covert regicide, now represents not only the paternal and symbolic law, but also precisely the kind of law "around which a secure, a sacrally corroborated, masculine identity can be organized,"[28] a pervasive occurrence Hamlet acutely observes in the expeditiously achieved male identities of Polonius, Gildenstern, Rosencrantz, and Laertes, who are all bent on reorganizing their loyalties.

At the same time, Hamlet also registers a Kristevan resonance of the maternal in the form of his strangely lingering desire to retrieve the ideal mother, while still contending with his impulse to

expel her. His ferocious maternal repelling here, ironically then, can be thought to form the obverse of the high stakes of such desire which remembers his parents as ideal figures, particularly his father embodying the transcendent authority attending and nurturing the ideal mother: "so loving to my mother / That he might not beteem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly" (1.2.144-46). Hamlet's longing remembrance in turn substitutes what Kristeva describes as the *chora,* that space where he grew fused with the mother and which he left in order to be under the father's law, because it anchors Gertrude in her enactment of ideal motherhood, like "Niobe, all tears" following "my poor father's body" (1.2.153, 152).

This desirous, ideal maternal image belies the destructive power behind tears, however. Excretions, such as her tears, are part of "these body fluids [of] . . . defilement [and] are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death"; they insist on body boundaries as fluid and subject to instability, according to Kristeva, who echoes Mary Douglas: excretions "by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body."[29] Applied to *Hamlet*, her tears shed for "so excellent a king" (1.2.143) turn out to be false and impure precisely because they are reminders of the permeability of borders: Gertrude's body not only rewrites King Hamlet's symbolic order and law; it also makes it impossible for Hamlet to reconstruct himself in the image of a time-unbound mythic male self ("but no more . . . / than I to Hercules" [1.2.158]) and prepares him to experience the onset of the feeling of abjection within himself later on.

When she was Hamlet's queen mother, she was safely preserved under his father's symbolic order ("Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" [1.2.147-49]). Remarried, Gertrude is now under Claudius's order, and her tears, leaking heavily from the quintessentially female body, horrify his reminiscences ("Must I remember?") as "most unrighteous tears" "in her galled eyes" (1.2.147, 159, 160). As Mary Douglas continues in the above note, all borderlines are dangerous and marginal areas, and eyes, like other orifices of the body, are where the paternal order is blown to extinction, just as Claudius has accomplished through Gertrude. What naturally follows is Hamlet's sweeping, expelling rite of maternal abjection with "Frailty, thy name is woman!" exposing Gertrude as the source of both moral and sexual weakness and the "active murderer" of his own corporeal body (1.2.150).[30]

It is no surprise, then, that Hamlet's succeeding efforts to confine and curb so as then to repel Gertrude and Ophelia are accompanied with the increasingly foreboding knowledge of his own frailty, eventuating in self-erasure. In act 2, scene 2, Gertrude's boundary-effacing maternal sensuality is now transferred onto the question of the fecund, yet lethal, female body of Ophelia. Hamlet warns Polonius that it would be dangerous for Ophelia to traffic in the sun. He is referring back to "I am too much in the sun" in the previous scene (1.2.69), the sun being Claudius and his symbolic law. The implied danger is that the specious sun-god (the male gender like Claudius) impregnates the "frailty" of Ophelia who, having turned dead-dog, breeds maggots "being a go[o]d kissing carrion" (2.2.197-98). This warning is shot under the guise of Hamlet's pretend-madness humour, of course, and beyond Polonius's ken: maggots devour the dead, and if the sun-kissed mortals like him are like maggots in their mortality, a potentially maggot-breeding female like Ophelia is mortality itself.

But such humour, whether aimed at Polonius or at Ophelia, only disguises the dawning knowledge of his own self-abnegation in a world in which a male identity is constituted by female abjection coded with male fear and desire. In act 3, scene 1, Hamlet continues to contend with this configuration of motherhood, fecund but lethal female body, and the delusive stability of his symbolic self. In the ritualistic expelling of the properties and potentialities of the female body—"Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.99-162)—Hamlet extends his previous warning to Polonius ("Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but, as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't" [2.2.201-203]) and associates the maggot-breeding body specifically with feminine physicality and sexuality, icons of filth and decay. This point is especially apparent as he fuses Gertrude and Ophelia into "breeder[s] of sinners," these abject figures putting him, as Kristeva writes, "at the border of [his] condition as a living being."[31] Such a female body obliterates not just his former claim to be her lover; it also condemns his soul through physical corruption. With an incantatory "Get thee to a nunnery," Hamlet attempts to obscure and contain the feminine power at the same time, only to become acutely aware of the fragility of his masculine self:

> I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck that I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such

> fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us. (3.1.131-40)

His baiting of Ophelia before the production of *The Mousetrap* (3.2) and his brief soliloquy following it extend this awareness of the temporality of his body as he battles the collapse of the symbolic through his duty to revenge. Female bodies like Ophelia's readily bleed, leak, and secrete, making deadly male entrance posible; as Kristeva remarks, they "can wreck the infinite."[32] His verbal play on "nothing" alludes not just to Ophelia's sexual integrity alone; also detectable is the sense that the power of women bestows him life but without transcendent infinity. Therefore, even his attention to female sexuality wrecks him, he claims waggishly, literally reducing him to physical "nothing" unless he expels his thoughts to "lie between maids' legs" (3.2.125-26). Shortly after, answering his mother's summons, he professes to be "cruel" though "not unnatural" to her, to "speak daggers to her but use none," and not to "let . . . The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom" (3.2.428-29). These are all verbal acts of expelling female abjection if only to reassure his essential "nature" (3.2.426).

The Closet scene (3.4) climaxes Hamlet and Gertrude at their parting thresholds of abjection precisely because Gertrude seems to continue defeating Hamlet's tenuous custody of the symbolic self. Established differences and all the customary categories are invoked in his first soliloquy and elsewhere: for instance, "Hyperion" vs. "satyr" (1.2.144), "celestial bed" vs. "garbage" (1.5.63-64), "moor" vs. "fair mountain" (3.4.76-77), "devil" vs. "angel" (3.4.183). But, here, they are incomprehensible to her and thus abolished by her:

> *Queen:* Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
> *Hamlet:* Mother, you have my father much offended (3.4.12-13).

> *Queen:* Have you forgot me?
> *Hamlet:* No, by the rood, not so.
> You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
> And (would it were not so) you are my mother.
> *Queen:* Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak. (3.4.18-22)

Indeed, the heart of what appears "a rash and bloody deed" (3.4.33) in the scene lies not so much in the "accidental" killing of Polonius,[33] as in Hamlet's almost self-forgetting, savage reminder to her of the importance of the clear boundaries of meaning that can guarantee the stability and totality of their symbolic selves—the Queen, a king, his brother, good mother, and Hamlet the prince and son:

> Such an act
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
> From the fair forehead of an innocent love
> And sets s blister there, makes marriage vows
> As false as dicers' oaths – O, such a deed
> As from the body of contraction plucks
> The very soul, and sweet religion makes
> A rhapsody of words! Heaven's face does glow
> O'er this solidity and compound mass
> With heated visage, as against the doom,
> Is thought-sick at the act. (3.4.49-60)

So here, in her room within the closed, curtained walls (which is an ironic objectification of Kristeva's *chora*, signifying both the mother's womb and the son's grave), Hamlet points to the two pictures of the two brothers and "bring[s] [her] to the test" on what her "heyday in the blood" (3.4.79) has wrought. In this way, he frees himself of the abjection in the maternal and readies her to become his ideal mother and his father's legitimate queen once more, in a world which will no longer be dominated by "a king of shreds and patches" (3.4.117)—and where, as Joel Fineman, evoking the Kristevan notion of boundaries, says, binary systems are nullified by "her sensuality which has abolished Difference in Denmark. By sleeping first with one brother and then with the second . . . Gertrude makes it finally apparent that there is in Denmark No Difference at all."[34] Bringing her to the savage degree of the dangers inherent in erasing the physical differences between King Hamlet and Claudius, Hamlet gives voice to the growing, painful knowledge that accompanies the loss of his symbolic self that would "draw attention to the fragility of the [paternal] law."[35] I see that the Claudius-mandated dispatching of Hamlet to England fleshes out Hamlet's final loss of and the separation from the *chora*, while his grudging obeisance to Claudius again throws into relief the fragility of the idealization of Old Hamlet's law.

What I gain from tracing these contestations between the maternal and feminine and the paternal and masculine is a paradox that Hamlet can signify a force of the symbolic only if he can confine, control, and expel female abjection. As Hamlet increasingly comes to realize, Gertrude and Ophelia, possessed of corporeal authority, point towards the impossibility of an ideal realm to which his material body aspires.

This paradox, accentuating a progressive volatility of Hamlet's symbolic self, also enables another condition of paradox to arise, further problematizing his being since he must concentrate on his

hidden, yet more urgent, subjective self as a revenger. Namely, when his father's Ghost as a "spectral other"[36] commands, "So art thou to revenge," the Ghost pushes to its limits the crisis in Hamlet's paternally inscribed self (1.5.12), and transforms his ontological status.

It is this new orientation toward Hamlet's being that intriguingly approximates the several threads of Renaissance discourse on the morality and politics of revenge to the Kristevan horror and attraction of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Lily Bess Campbell and later Eleanor Prosser have shown that commentary against revenge varies, leaving the situation unavoidably ambivalent.[37] On one hand is the widespread official disapproval of revenge based on Biblical (especially Genesis 4.9-15 and Romans 12.19) and positive laws. For instance, William Dickinson, stressing the function of positive law as deriving from the Word of God, prohibits private revenge and counsels the victims of severe, malicious, and unjustified injuries to adhere to prescribed legal procedures so as to maintain order and justice throughout the realm.[38] Thomas Beard, for another, believes in providential punishments accorded in this world to Christians if they leave vengeance to God, even under corrupt and tyrannical kings.[39]

Opposite to their thinking is Francis Bacon, who concedes that revenge might be justified, having several potentially affirmative functions. Characterizing revenge as "a kind of Wilde Justice," he provocatively argues that the offender deserves to suffer a revenger's punishment for the harm he has committed.[40] The revenger operates in what Catherine Belsey calls border territories "between justice and crime," where the revenger is himself freed from exposing himself to punishment of the law and where the revenger participates "in the installation of the sovereign subject, entitled to take action in accordance with conscience and on behalf of the law."[41]

At its very base, then, what is common to Bacon's qualified idea of a revenger and Kristeva's probing of abjection is a cross-epochal insight, leading to the irony of King Hamlet's Ghost as a being that resides the space that is "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[42] In the Ghost's own admission, he is

> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
> And for the day confined to fast in fires
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.15-18)

Hamlet's subsequent revenge act therefore substantiates Kristeva's observation: "Any crime, because it draws attention to

the fragility of the law, is abject but . . . hypocritical revenge [is] even more so because [it heightens] the display of fragility."[43] With his "dread command," the Ghost renders Hamlet an abject while radicalizing him into becoming a transgressive outsider existing in abjection, because as a revenger, he is forced not to "respect borders, positions, rules" of King Hamlet's own symbolic law as well as Claudius's.

Hamlet's emergent new self-purchase as a figure of abjection is equally confirmed in his own words in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, long accepted as Hamlet's contemplation of suicide. There, Hamlet enumerates the world's iniquities, one of which is found in the often neglected phrase, "the law's delay." Rather than Hamlet contemplating suicide, I submit that his primary interest here resides in foregrounding the law's centrality in his life as an avenger and crystallizes his momentous awareness of social displacement as an outsider. Placed in the choice between passively accepting an injustice and resisting it by committing an act of "wild justice," Hamlet is wrenched from an established identity ("Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son," according to Claudius [1.2.121], "Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state," according to Ophelia [3.1.166]) and forced to inhabit a new one as a legally marginalized being; in fact, he is in danger of falling outside the legal system completely. To put up with "law's delay" means to leave crime unpunished and disorder triumphant.

Unlike Fortinbras and Laertes, for Hamlet to shrink from revenge in a world that looks upon it as a sacred obeisance to paternal law is to exclude himself from that society. As head of state, even if illicit to the Ghost and Hamlet's view, Claudius wields supreme judicial power. The delay of Claudius's law indeed consigns Hamlet to inhabit the extra-legal space of collision between patriarchal law which prohibits revenge, and the illicit act to avenge "his [father's] foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.31) as a privately appointed avenging self.

Such a fundamental shift in his ontological status helps, I think, in understanding the ambivalent responses of horror and desire of the Ghost in *Hamlet* as another paradox because the Ghost's appearance forces Hamlet's attention to the paternal figure as a destabilizing abjection, its commandment further confirming both his transgressive role and the fragility of the symbolic. Erupting in an already destabilized state of Denmark, the Ghost confronts Hamlet with questionable materiality: the corpse encased in the armor as Hamlet's cry, "What may this mean / That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel," confirms (1.4.56-57). And its fall

from symbolic grace is clear, when Kristeva, describing the corpse as abjection, uses the infinitive "to fall," *cadere* in French, hence cadaver, the corpse:

> My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. . . Deprived of world, therefore, I *fall in faint.*[44]

Even the Ghost's own syphilis-like, diseased body description vivifies its abject fall,[45] though Hamlet attempts to reestablish its transcendent ideal images by calling out, "thee," "Hamlet," "King," "Father," "Royal Dane" (1.4.49-50). Claudius's "cursed hebona" courses through Old Hamlet's "natural gates and alleys of the body," causing "the leprous distilment" to suddenly "posset" his "thin and wholesome blood," his "smooth body" erupting into "tetter barked about, / Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust" (1.5.69, 71, 74, 75, 78-79). As Kristeva points out, the corpse of "such a questionable shape" (1.5.4) is part of that impurity and disgust and poses the ultimate ontological threat to Hamlet. King Hamlet's corpse literalizes the breakdown of familiar rational and moral "arrangements of knowledge" within Hamlet's world and confronts the symbolic King Hamlet where he, "fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, would find death, along with nirvana."[46] It is meaningful, I think, that King Hamlet is rendered a corpse, as Lucianus reenacts in *The Mousetrap*, through one of the vulnerable orifices of the body, his ears (3.2.280-87), destabilizing the corporeal boundary. As Kristeva puts it, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject."[47]

In examining revenge, Bacon also says that "the most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy; but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish."[48] The tragic irony in Bacon's warning, applied to Hamlet the avenger, is this: More unnaturally than the maternal threat, it is the Ghost—once paternal law and order, but now another manifestation of the abject as a decaying corpse—that punishes Hamlet by impelling the eventual annihilation of Hamlet's body and his symbolically prescribed identity.

In the last scene, after consigning Hamlet to "rest" and "felicity" (5.2.362, 347), Horatio shifts Hamlet's "my story" from being a revenge play (a tale of "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts / . . . Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by the cunning and forc'd cause" [5.2.382-85]) to an ontological mystery of "things standing thus unknown" (5.2.361-62). Dying, Hamlet, too, offers himself up not only to the court, but also to our interpretation. And this, finally, seemingly is the purpose of his revenge task—to create a meaning of his self, as if in response to Kristeva's implicit questions embedded in the powers of horror: what is the nature of this world and what is the meaning of his outsider's place in this world?

In one of his essays, Mikhail Bakhtin clarifies that the outsider exercises a special mental sight through which he, she, or they can see what the insider cannot:

> In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*. In the realm of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself more fully and profoundly.[49]

Bakhtin explores what it means for us to be outsiders ("located outside"). When we are "located outside," Bakhtin suggests that we encounter and juxtapose with other autonomous cultural entities—whether words, sentences, discourses, or subjects—as deeply as possible. But having done this without merging with other cultures, we need to return to the understanding provided to us by our native selves or our native culture. Because we conserve our identities as well as theirs in a mutually enriching bond, we "engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures," and, therefore, we acquire an enriched understanding of "others" and ourselves. Bakhtin reverses the customarily negative status of the outsider into one of significant creative potentialities. He suggests that the outsider obtains an "epistemological privilege"[50] wherein one's consciousness of outsidedness privileges one, epistemologically, to move toward a moment of enlightenment and causes one to gain an enriched knowledge and understanding of the self, the others, and the world. In this sense, the borders

can be unexpected sites of discovery, empathy, knowledge, interpretation, and creative energy. On this point, Kristeva would have agreed wholeheartedly with Bakhtin whose works she brought to the attention of the Francophone world and beyond.[51]

In Bakhtin's terms, liminal figures like the avenger Hamlet are initiated into the realm of epistemological privilege. To the dominant society, outsiders have sacrificed their own positions within the system. And yet, Hamlet's quest for the knowledge of the self, through "pluck[ing] out the heart of . . . mystery" of his father's murder, leads him to an intratext that insists not only on the solution to a crime, but also on a larger mystery (3.2.364-45): he cannot always solve the mysteries of the self, and confident rationalism is woefully inadequate to explain much of what goes on in his world—an ironic, untested intuition Hamlet displayed as he lectured to Horatio early in the play: "And therefore as a stranger gives it welcome, / There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.174-76).

As his revenge quest for the solution of the murder mystery turns into the tragic quest of the mystery of the world and himself, the limits of the management of revenge and honor or of any other absolutist moral conduct are left ambiguous. In this sense, it cannot be without purpose that the Old Hamlet, the murdered king, was a murderer himself (1.1.91-103). However a "smiling, damned villain" Claudius may be (1.5.109), he cannot be villainous enough if King Hamlet appears in a context of revenge by Fortinbras as well. Further, placed amid the imprisoning Denmark (the diseased and ever changing ways human relations are formed and the traitorous plots are hatched), Hamlet, the individual self, cannot always solve the nature of the self. It is in this intrinsically tragic realization that Hamlet's lament "the time is out of joint" (1.5.215) sympathetically relates to Kristeva's notion of abjection as an exile who acquires a heightened understanding of the self and will thus be saved.

In the end, Hamlet's liberation derives from his symbolic reading of the hidden knowledge he discovers, and it is both epistemologically and existentially privileged: the former revealing the self and the world as a tenuous and contingent mystery, an ontological rupture within the self; and the latter affirming such insights as conferrable only on those who freely choose the status of avenger/outsider. And his arrival at this truth about himself restores him to what he primarily is: Horatio's scholarly narrator's soul, responding to Kristeva's scholarship, might just point to the play's title, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, and say that, in

its subtitle, his friend's final redemption is already prophesied, vindicating Shakespeare's art that Eliot has censured. Though Horatio must tell a story of "the horror within,"[52] caused by breakdowns in Hamlet's corporeal and epistemological self, Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, none other. Perennially situated in the in-between boundary of the epistemological privilege, Hamlet, in Horatio's telling, remains a "sweet prince," as his friend's valedictory orison movingly affirms, "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (5.2.361-62).

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998), 57, 58. Italics added.

2. Eliot, 59.

3. Eliot, 58.

4. Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1925), 217-52; Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. with notes and commentary by Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966); Mikhail Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff," *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 1-7.

5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64. Hereafter, all page references to Kristeva are to this publication. Etymologically, according to the *OED,* words "abject" and "abjection" begin to appear in usage early in the 1400s to describe the person, the action, or the condition of being "brought low in position, condition, or estate," resulting in becoming an outcast, excluded, rejected, humiliated, or despicable. It quotes a line from Shakespeare's *Henry VI* ("These paltry servile, abject Drudges" [4.1]) to mean those "down in spirit or hope, low in regard or estimation." In Kristeva's interpretation, abject and abjection are used interchangeably throughout her book.

6. Kristeva, 67.

7. Kristeva, 4.

8. Kristeva, 4.

9. Kristeva, 9-10.

10. Kristeva, 64.

11. Kristeva, 14.

12. Kristeva, 6, 10, 13.

13. Kristeva, 14, 10.

14. Kristeva, 2.

15. Kristeva, 13, 75.

16. Kristeva, 17.

17. Kristeva, 17.

18. Kristeva, 2, 1-2.

19. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Norton, 1976); Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16, 15.

20. Text references are to act, scene, and line of the Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992). Subsequent citations appear in the text.

21. Kristeva, 72.

22. Kristeva, 64.

23. Kristeva, 3, 72.

24. Kelly Oliver, "Kristeva's Imaginary Father and the Crisis in the Paternal Function," *diacritics* 9 (summer-fall 1991): 49; Kristeva, 72.

25. Kristeva, 2.

26. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 14.

27. Kristeva, 72.

28. Joel Fineman, "Fratricide and Cuckoldry: Shakespeare's Doubles," *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Coppelia Kahn and Murray M. Schwarz (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), 90.

29. Kristeva, 25; Douglas, 121.

30. Adelman, 25.

31. Kristeva, 3.

32. Kristeva. 157.

33. Eric Sterling argues that Hamlet purposefully murders Polonius, in his "Shakespeare's HAMLET," in *The Explicator* 60 (Fall 2001): 2-5. I agree with him in that this is one of a series of revenges Hamlet commits before finally getting at Claudius directly.

34. Fineman, 89-90.

35. Kristeva, 4.

36. Paul D. Streufel, "Spectral Others: Theatrical Ghosts as the Negotiation of Alterity in Aeschylus and Shakespeare," *Intertexts* 8.1 (Spring 2004): 77-94.

37. Lily B. Campbell, "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England," *Modern Philology* 28 (1931): 281-96; Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), especially chapters 1-2.

38. William Dickinson, *The King's Right* (London, 1619), sigs. B4 verso, C verso, C2, D2. For the bibliographical information, I am indebted to *A Longman Cultural Edition Hamlet,* ed. Constance Jordan (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 175-6.

39. Thomas Beard, *The Theater of God's Judgments* (London, 1597), 225, 229. For the bibliographical information, I am indebted to *A Longman Cultural Edition Hamlet,* ed. Constance Jordan (New York, Boston, San Francisco: Pearson Longman, 2004), 177-78.

40. Francis Bacon, "Of Revenge," *The Essayes or Counsell, Civill and Morall,* ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 16; Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), 115, 116.

41. Belsey, 115.

42. Kristeva, 4.

43. Kristeva, 3-4.

44. Kristeva, 4.

45. Claudius's poison causes in King Hamlet the symptoms of venereal disease with the lazar-like tetter, which was one of the diagnostic signs of syphilis. See James Cleugh, *Secret Enemy: The Story of a Disease* (London: Thames, 1954), 46-50.

46. Kristeva, 63-64.

47. Kristeva, 4.

48. Bacon, 17.

49. Bakhtin, 6-7.

50. This is a term coined by Tzvetan Todorov whose explication of Bakhtin's idea of outsiders provides the basis for my arguments here. Todorov uses this particular expression to explain the status of the exile, a mode of being the other. See his *Nous et les autres: La reflexion francaise sur la diversite humanine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989), 390.

51. Bakhtin's influence on Kristeva can be seen, for instance, in chapters 2 and 3 of *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 34-61, 62-73.

52. Kristeva, 53.