

Leave Her to Heaven

Joanne Conway

Lacan's seminar of 1958-1959 is entitled *Desire and Its Interpretation* and in it he interrogates the nature of desire in the subject – what is it, how is it originated, where can it be designated and what does it mean to be a desiring subject.

For Lacan desire is not adapted or related to an object – it is not a desire for something which can be satisfied but it precisely subverts that idea – that is, desire is related to phantasy – an unconscious phantasy of which the subject knows nothing – it is Lacan says, beyond him – that is, it speaks through him via the unconscious.

So desire for psychoanalysis is orientated by/fixated to an object in phantasy, an imaginary object which can never be attained – which in fact does not exist – and consequently its attainment is an impossibility for the human subject. An impossibility but nevertheless a crucial organisation – because desire in effect pushes the subject into the world and sustains him – it is not the carrot, if you like – but it is the scaffolding behind the subject which props him up in his relation to the world and others. It is a constant force which impels/propels the subject through life – when all is going well...It not per se an object of desire but an object *cause* of desire – it causes desire to be regenerative.

So what of this object which does not exist? Its fabrication emerges from and is contingent upon the mother-child relation *and* its interruption. The object *cause* of desire is, one could say, a remainder or reminder of a consistent intrusion. **Freud's** conception of the Oedipus complex concerns the figure of (and one could say destiny of) the father as interrupter of this relation so as to instate the law of prohibition or the incest taboo. Lacan elaborated this in terms of a paternal function or operation, where something which comes to interrupt this relation fulfils the paternal function – it does not have to be the figure of the father in reality.

Here Lacan particularly emphasised the operation/emergence of language in the child as establishing the function of separation between mother and child. That is language by its very nature comes between.

Language separates, scatters and confounds. The fact of language in and of itself imposes this separation and, one might add, isolation, in each. It is an illusion to presume that perfect communication between beings is possible, precisely because it protects us from the possibility, to use the phrase from the Old Testament (Genesis' story of Babel) of a **“return to each other”**. **To return to each other, to return to what** was once lost, for Lacan, is the loss of oneself as a speaking, desiring subject. For one can only desire what is lost, one can only speak in an attempt to demand or articulate something of this lost thing. Speech and subjectivity are caused by this lost thing.

And this lost thing (as we have heard) is the mother. As a mother is enraptured with the first words her child utters, a moment wherein the child articulates something which a mother interprets as an attempt at meaning, a message to her - it also heralds loss – the loss of something in the enjoyment of bodies – it heralds the imposition of boundaries, limits and the presence of death. Something emerges here which signifies a separation whilst it appears on the surface as a promise of communication.

It is a necessity for the child that the mother, as a source of enjoyment and pleasure be lost in order to take up a place in the world outside that couple.

It is the fact that the father makes a woman of the mother (or a mother of the woman?) that the child can attempt to extricate himself and the mother -once desired- becomes split into woman/mother. And just as the mother is divided – so too is the child - a division founded on the conscious and unconscious – what Lacan terms the beyond of the subject and where desire must accommodate itself.

Radically the child – the speaking being- must, via language find a means to represent his or her being, articulate something of their desire. Even more radically – for Lacan - the speaking subject is a *mere effect* of language – that is, there is nothing substantial in being – there is no essence of subjectivity outside of language. To be or not...

So we are captured/ensnared in language in order to represent something of desire – unconscious desire – so how can we know it when we meet it? Where can it be found in language and how can it be recognised or interpreted?

It is here in this seminar that Lacan points to the poets – particularly the metaphysical poets as those who know something about the articulation of desire - the poet and the playwright in fact – and in this seminar the playwright is Shakespeare and the play – “the play is the thing” – is the tragedy of Hamlet.

Freud had already interpreted the play of Hamlet and designated the hero's procrastination as related to his encounter with his unconscious Oedipal desire for his mother and death wish toward his father. It is for this reason he procrastinates in killing Claudius – his uncle – **who hastily replaces Hamlet's father not only as King but as husband to his brother's wife. Hamlet** – for Freud – cannot kill Claudius as commanded by the ghost of his dead father – because Hamlet is as guilty as Claudius – in that he too wanted what his father and now Claudius possesses – namely the mother Gertrude.

Lacan however – interprets Hamlet's encounter in another dimension (in fact Lacan has many but I will focus on one aspect). For Lacan what Hamlet encounters is not Oedipal desire as such, but **an eruption of, a spilling out of the mother's sexual** desire, the desire *of* the mother – for Lacan what Hamlet encounters is the horror of femininity – in the characters of both Gertrude and Ophelia.

There are particular scenes within **the play wherein this too much of the mother's** enjoyment is spoken – first via the ghost of the father – the man who loved his wife so much as to attempt to stop the wind from lashing her cheeks. In as much as the father serves to separate the child from the mother – he also provides a shield/a protection for the child in so far as the father castrates or cuts the mothers enjoyment – prevents the mother from, as Lacan called it, enjoying her own product.

So precisely the father acts as an alibi – *I could be happy/satisfied if he wasn't around* – so when the father as support is torn away - the **engulfment of the mother's jouissance** threatens once more.

Hamlet is not only entreated to avenge his father's murder but also to act in terms of the mother. The ghost decries the state of affairs in the Royal bed chamber since his death;

**Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her (Act 1 Scene V The Platform)**

Hamlet, as counselled by his father's ghost – must “leave her to heaven” – that is refrain from thinking on the sins or luxury of the mother's **sexual desire**. So in the beyond of death – the father attempts to brook or stem something of this enjoyment of the mother and enjoins his son to keep away.

But Hamlet cannot remove himself or raise himself out from under his mother's thrall. After the staging of play – where **Hamlet sets out to “catch the conscience of the King”** that is reveal to Claudius his own infernal assassination of his brother – everything is set for Hamlet to act – to avenge his father. And yet he hesitates, he **seems more obsessed with his mother's sexual relation to his uncle than his own “almost blunted purpose”**. He visits his mother's chamber and articulates what can only be described as violent recriminations and later pathetic appeals which Gertrude upon hearing says will tear her heart in two. Hamlet lays bare her obscene sexual enjoyment;

**You cannot call it love; for at your age
The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble,
And waits upon the judgment [...]**

**Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty, [...]**

Gertrude responds **O, speak to me no more;
These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears**

The ghost enters the scene between the two – reminding Hamlet of his blunted purpose. **The ghost intercedes and asks Hamlet to step between “her and her fighting soul. Conceit in weakest bodies, strongest works”.**

Here the father asks **Hamlet to step between “her and her”** (between you and you). To step effectively into the space of desire – of which, at this point, Hamlet is dispossessed. This space/cut is for Lacan, the place where the analyst intervenes/operates (Lacan, lesson III, Nov).

Hamlet cannot enter there. **His aggressive passion is mirrored by Gertrude’s sexual excess.** Hamlet will only find this space by means of a mortal cut. Before this scene ends **there is one more plea on Hamlet’s behalf for his mother to temper her desire.**

**Good night: but go not to mine uncle's bed;
Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain to-night,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence: the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either [] the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency (Act III, Scene IV)**

And yet in a moment – his plea collapses. He fails. He is spent. He sends Gertrude to the “reechy kisses” of Claudius, to be touched by “his damn’d fingers”. Hamlet literally collapses, he cannot raise himself from the desire *of* the mother.

And why? Because the support, the scaffolding provided by the object *cause* of desire and the fantasy has been breeched – **by the death of his father and Hamlet’s cruel rejection of his object** – that is the feminine object of Ophelia. As Lacan says – Hamlet made a mother of Ophelia – he made of her a progenitor – “a breeder of sinners” - and by that expulsion of the object he was lost to his own desire and suspended before the engulfment of the desire *of* the mother. As Lacan says – to live without desire, is to experience the pain of existence reduced to itself – **to be or not...**