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In an Other's Time: Re-Reading Hamlet with Lacan and Ljubljana to Discover Metametatextuality Beyond the Metatextual

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In an Other's Time: Re-Reading Hamlet with Lacan and Ljubljana to Discover Metametatextuality Beyond the Metatextual

Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Malynne Sternstein for her occasional advice and helpful suggestions throughout this project.

In an Other's Time: Hamlet, Lacan, Ljubljana, and Metametatextuality

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Abstract

Modern and contemporary readings of *Hamlet* attempt to reconcile the titular Dane by either criticizing or spurning his subjectivity. I see the play's intense focus on his iconoclasm not as a failure nor a red herring best understood through another conceptual vehicle, but as a field of inquiry and judgement yet under-explored. By leveraging Lacanian theories of the subject, particularly through Slavoj Žižek's and Alenka Zupančič's interpretations, this paper takes a careful view of the drama so as to resituate Hamlet as a post-structural subject *par excellence*, one whose constitution necessarily destroys the conceits of the drama that contains him and calls into question the ethical dimensions of psychoanalytic time. I introduce the key concepts of metametatextuality, possible impossibility, and impossible impossibility alongside paradigmatic works of the Lacanian literature to access the elusive vacillations of the Lacanian Hamlet. Ultimately, examining Hamlet qua analytic subject illuminates the reader's experience of the psychoanalytic subject's inherent nothingness. This illumination, achieved only through the comparison of the culturally diverse texts at play, situates the experience of reading *Hamlet* as an indispensable foundation upon which modern current in psychoanalysis may stake their claim to truth. On an individual level, my reading puts the humanistic stakes of the analytic subject in stark relief: in the lonely light of a solipsistic nothingness, what are the ramifications and relevancies of our desires and decisions?

Keywords: literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, shakespeare, lacan, hamlet, Zupančič, Žižek, metatextual, metametatextual

Introduction

T.S. Eliot's brief essay "Hamlet and His Problems" declares *Hamlet* a failure. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative,'" writes Eliot, "such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot). Eliot argues that the play's actions do not line up with its intended emotional beats, denigrating its quality in spite of its charms. More recently, Andrew Cutrofello concludes his study of philosophical responses to *Hamlet* by determining the play to be "the objective correlate of determinate negation" (154). Prince Hamlet is the catalyst for a sort of Hegelian sublation. He renders the Absolute Idea at the center of the subject a necessary nothingness. *Hamlet*, in Cutrofello's view, remains an artistic failure after Eliot, but also a philosophical breeding ground fertilized by a titular character who is more dialectic pawn than tragic figure.

While there is indeed a necessary nothingness at *Hamlet's* core, I hold that witness of this nothingness (recognition and comprehension of it in a nontrivial fashion) requires intimate engagement by the reader with a Hamlet who is a subject torn from subjectivity and never satisfactorily returned to it. This engagement leads to the experience of impossible nothingness by Hamlet and the reader alike. To demonstrate such and surpass Hamlet's alleged failures, I propose a reading that marshals Lacanian psychoanalysis and its recent developments in the Ljubljana school. By implicating the reader in the guise of the subject and the Other, I point toward a new understanding of Hamlet. He is not a shell whose presence probes subjectivity's

limits, but a subject who comes to intimacy with constitutive nothingness and must rediscover the capacity of worth in its wake. Crucially, such intimacies and discoveries occur through the reader and are as much the reader's as the prince's; the play cannot be read without considering its how its psychoanalytic dynamic with the reader shapes both Hamlet's and the reader's subject-life. In the end, tracing Hamlet's nothingness properly reads the play as constitutive of, not correlate to, an understanding of subjective nothingness. *Hamlet* is not a correlate to or evidence of the subject's nothingness so much as it is an experience *of* the subject's nothingness, an experience that, in the last analysis, forces the reader to reconcile their own impossibility.

Sublimation, alienation, and the death drive sculpt the contours of my reading. Time determines their ultimate significance. Particularly, I revisit Hamlet's movement into a time out-of-joint by taking it as a departure from Lacanian logical time.¹ In light of this, it turns out that the contents of Hamlet's time-out-of-joint are ill-understood, though their consequences are well explicated in contemporary theories of Lacanian nothingness. I work to show that these analyses draw their claims to truth only in the wake of an experience of nothingness that the reader encounters through *Hamlet*. Toward an understanding of this out-of-joint, I propose three neologisms that are necessary to clarify my thesis: possible impossibility, impossible impossibility, and metametatextuality. I now examine these terms in that order before re-presenting my study's trajectory in the proper vocabulary.

Three Neologisms for Lacanian Analytics

Possible impossibility and impossible impossibility are both dependent on the *impossible* as the constitution of the subject. Alenka Zupančič describes the subject in Lacan's "para-

¹ Thinking of the "out-of-joint" as a subjective transpiration to time is inspired by Deleuze's *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, though my treatment of it differs from his.

ontology” as a “collateral to its own impossibility,” a constitution achieved through repetition toward an object of desire whose ontological status is a gap, a lack, a structuring lack (134). This lack can be understood by examining an object’s symbolization, its meaning. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, a symbol always “covers up a constitutive disharmony,” for it shall never reach the Thing it symbolizes, which remains “in the void of the subject itself.” (333). Despite this deficiency, the subject persists, experiences, and desires. Its “void,” which harbors the secret of the Thing desired, renders desire unending and the object of desire unrealizable. Žižek shows that even if this ideal object could breach reality, the realized ideal would immediately cease to match itself (402). In a paradigmatic example, any given father shall never match the Name-of-the-Father, which is located in an ever-present but never-accessed field of meaning: the Other (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, ch. 23). Upon its identification at the symbolic realm of meaning, and the imaginary realm of apparition, the ideal is always already removed from the Ideal (its correspondence in the Other that structures it as such). The subject’s desire may thus be only a “repetition” that broaches its object asymptotically, though there is no actual object (Lacan, *The Four*, 50-1).

I intervene to note that the living subject in pursuit of desire does not comprehend the impossibility of its pursuit as such. It insists on the *possibility* of its desire. Even if the subject formally notes impossibility through an intellectual discourse (e.g., in psychoanalysis), theoretical meanderings will not alter its constitution or sway its faith in the mundane feasibility of its constitution.

Thus, even as the pulse of the drives can never and will never reach its conclusion, the subject continues its yearning; this is possible impossibility. A subject who is constituted by this impossibility, and yet proceeds in experience as if the impossibility of desire is possible, is at

possible impossibility. This formulation juxtaposes the impossibility sketched by psychoanalytic theory alongside the necessary possibility of daily and personal experience. The subject's formation upon nothing is impossible only because the subject's "something" is self-evidently possible via the witness of each subject. In plain terms, a subject desires and seeks—a person lives as if they are not a nothing but a *something*, specifically a *someone*. Every action of psychic and physical life is undertaken in this state of possible impossibility.

In contrast, impossible impossibility would be² a state of inextricable consumption by the impossibility that is ordinarily ignored. Impossible impossibility turns the subject against itself. It collapses sense for both the afflicted and the observer as it probes the limits of the subject through a mutual collapse. To better detail this concept, a sojourn on sublimation, alienation, and time is necessary.

The primary fuel of the impossible nothingness at the Lacanian subject's core is sublimation-alienation. Alienation is the subject's oscillation between Being, located within itself, and meaning, located in the Other (Lacan, *The Four*, 211). It is the driving process of the subject's collateral status. It guarantees the desired object, the *objet a*, as the Other's. So, to employ Meaning, a subject slips away from Being. To realize Being, a subject slips away from Meaning. These processes occur as one, causing lacking tension. Phrased otherwise, alienation entails sublimation, in which the subject attempts an acquisition of the symbolic Other, an assimilation whose paradoxical result is acquisition of language that never belongs to the subject.

So, the impossibility of the subject belongs to the unconscious and the Other. Drives fixate upon the *objet a*, but this fixation is a symbolic mediation for the impossibility of satiating the drive. Lacan writes of the oral drive "no food will ever satisfy the oral drive, except by

² It always "would be," for it cannot be said to "be."

circumventing the eternally lacking object” (Lacan, *The Four*, 180). To accommodate the eternally lacking object, the drives attempt to sublimate an *objet a*. However, the *objet a* itself is at a tension. Lacan formulates that “every drive is virtually a death drive,” and Zupančič pins down his meaning: “the death drive [...] refers to an active split or declination within every drive” (Lacan qtd. in Zupančič, 102, 103). To have human desire is to be driven toward negativity, driven back toward the nothingness behind the *objet a*. Of course, the subject, in possible impossibility, does not and cannot recognize the *objet a* as the nothingness that it is. It is through psychoanalytic theory that we broach, though not unravel or expose, nothingness by inspecting the residues of its presence—language and consciousness. The death drive encapsulates the subject’s relation to the nothingness in possible impossibility by circling it and perhaps pursuing it, though the subject is always unaware that the object of desire is not substantial, as it seems.

In light of this, “repetition” may also be described as the subject’s continuous attempts at nothing, the death drive’s orchestration of each drive. This structural undergirding of desire manifests extremely early for the subject; it is always-already informed by an unconscious that differentiates from consciousness at a primal split in proximity to a formative trauma (Lacan, *The Four*, 58). This renders the matter of time in Lacan problematic: when a subject encounters new stimulus or forges a “new” desire, to what extent is such development preordained by the unconscious? The phenomenal realm’s influence is at stake here (in terms of a new object’s apparition), though I tackle the scopic drive, the visual, and the constitution of the subject thereof in detail later. For now, to address this preordination, a note on time is prudent. Lacan’s “logical time” is here instructive. Lacan identifies the foundation of truth at an always-already intersubjective subjectivity:

“This reference of the ‘I’ to others as such must, in each critical moment, be temporalized in order to dialectically reduce the *moment of concluding the time for comprehending* to last but the *instant of the glance*” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 173).

Logical operation broadly construed is a series of movements that are necessarily condensed into self-recognition through negation—the instant of the glance. At the dialectic temporalization of this inter-recognition, the “the signifying battery is given” before the motion even begins (Lacan, *The Four*, 39). The truth, logic’s consummation, emerges at a synthesis that transpires comprehension at the moment one witnesses other subjects. The reference to “I,” the solidification of the subject’s identity as an “I” amongst other “I”s, depends on time, even as time depends upon some “signifying battery” (a system of symbols) that precedes the moment of recognition and the establishment of truth. There is, therefore, not an instant that is not *of the glance*. Any claim or understanding relies upon this dialectical compression at the glance, an appeal to a glance that occurs before the reference of “I” becomes legible. Time itself, the notion of precedence and before or after insofar as a subject can logically identify those things, depends on this compression; it is of absolute importance to any sense of a desiring, aware self. Desire itself precedes this referential establishment, though as the subject does not claim itself as such, this desire is referred to as a “battery” in Lacan’s account.

My sojourn complete, I return to the second neologism, impossible impossibility. It manifests temporally, at the collapse of logical time. The dialectical constitution of the subject unravels, and the instant of the glance no longer satisfies the grounds for truth. Logical time remains the grounds for truth per se, but the truth falls out. The conventional tracts of desire cease coherency, even if desire itself, the unconscious, and related structures may be said to persist. The subject, for its part, moves from the logical time in tune with other subjects to an experience of the impossible, a comprehension of the impossibility prescribed by sublimation

and alienation. This state of impossible impossibility must be pre-theoretical, as the collapse of logical time obfuscates an intellectual or analytic approach; the impossibly impossible subject does not become knowledgeable of the nothingness as much as it inhabits it. Since theoretical encapsulation falls short by definition, impossible impossibility's effects and ramifications are best remembered through a contextualized example and the third neologism: metametatextuality in *Hamlet*. Remembered, and not understood or discovered, for an explication of impossible impossibility's effects can only occur in its wake.

Hamlet's status at the time-out-of-joint necessarily entails the metametatextual.

Metametatextuality is the effort to cast Hamlet's metatextual soliloquy back upon the play at its base textual level and thus situate a character necessarily beyond his own fiction's scope back within that fiction. Anticipating issues regarding the play's aspects as drama and literature, I note that my analysis centers on the *reader*, whom I consider an audience member to be a type of. Ultimately, the distinction is not particularly relevant for the metametatextual.

By metametatextual, I mean that Hamlet, being a character, is written-read into existence, nothing until penned by Shakespeare *and* considered by the reader. One might argue this of any fictional character, but that would underplay Hamlet's particularities. Aside from blatantly instructing potential actors in acting, his penchant for soliloquy means that he is at least metatextual (Shakespeare, 3.2.1-44). Soliloquy is Hamlet's uncannily knowledgeable appeal to the reader as the Other. Through it, he frequently accomplishes sublimation through re-externalizing his mind and matters. Comprehending what transpires between Hamlet and the reader requires an engagement with metametatextuality, as the reader is left with no signifying battery except the text to make sense of a moment that goes beyond the text's scope. Later in my study, a careful treatment of Hamlet's soliloquy in its proper context will fortify this claim;

before I explore its situation in the text, the overview of this unusual term's derivation seemed necessary.

Metametatextuality lacks the guarantee of meaning, the foundation from which the dialectical motion of logical time may commence. The typical guarantee given to a reader is that of the text, insofar as its meanings and symbols are sublimated via reading. But in the instance of Hamlet's soliloquy, the text depends on the reader for the same meaning that the reader depends on the text for. The ricochet of meaning between the two seems as if the possibility of understanding is forever deferred. This deferment shall be shown to mirror Hamlet's ethical dilemma in that both scrutinize the legitimacy of mundanity in light of psychoanalytic theory.

This ricochet of deferment and collapse of meaning is the condition that moves the subject to impossible impossibility. Only at an engagement with Hamlet as a metatextual *subject* (as I shall show he is) does the metametatextual open impossible impossibility for the reader. Once this realm opens, myriad concerns surface, chiefly regarding the feasibility and sustainability of subject-life in light of its inevitable impossibility. Psychoanalytic theory only illuminates this impossibility, but to sketch a knife and feel its stab are two separate matters.

Having detailed my neologisms, I return to *Hamlet* to rephrase my present inquiry with their aid. Reading *Hamlet* is a case study of impossible impossibility. Through the medium of soliloquy, Hamlet suggests metatextuality and inspires inhabitation of deferment, of the lack itself: metametatextuality. The play's course is not the meanderings of an indecisive subject at the millstone of desire who lacks objective correlate (in Eliot's sense) to substantiate his sporadic action, nor a demonstration of an objective correlate as a residual (in Cutrofello's sense) to the broader nothingness of the subject. Rather, it is a progression that the reader qua subject takes alongside Hamlet from possible impossibility to impossible impossibility via metametatextuality.

At that point, the experience of the profound tensions proves to be beyond the guarantees of possibility and forces the subject, disillusioned of possible impossibility, to reckon with that impossibility. In the end, I will have opened the metametatextuality as a realm of reading whose limits and content must be further researched. Further, it will be apparent that a metametatextual reading of *Hamlet*, by opening a reckoning with nothing, must broach a critically important psychoanalytic question: how shall we, the possibly impossible subjects, live through the impossibility of living?

The Play's the Thing

Traditional criticisms of “Hamlet” inform my reading of the first act. To suitably contextualize the entrance of metametatextuality, which occurs at 1.5, a capitulation of these traditional criticisms is prudent. As my understanding of act one builds from their foundations rather than challenges them, I will be brief. At the start of *Hamlet*, Hamlet suffers from melancholia. Lacan’s essay “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet” threads this thesis in detail. First, it must be noted that Prince Hamlet is “the principal subject of the play” (Lacan, “Desire,” 12). His insistent presence in the text and on the stage makes the play “the drama of individual subjectivity” (Lacan, “Desire,” 12). Hamlet is a subject. More precisely, if he is anything beyond a literary character, he is a subject. Let it not be said that he is just a character; he, like any subject, claims an “I,” which is received by the reader. After all, the “I [...] is born somewhere other than in the place where the discourse is enunciated—namely, in the person who listens to it” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 758). If Hamlet cannot be said to be a subject through the text itself, he is assuredly one as he is received by a reader. This assertion renders not only Lacan’s psychoanalytic claim to Hamlet legible but substantiates any attempt to relate to or analyze Hamlet as a person-within-text.

At the start of the play, Hamlet is melancholic; he mourns. This is a possibly impossible state. The reader learns via soliloquy that Hamlet laments the state of things after his father's passing and mother's remarriage (Shakespeare, 1.2.129). The prince lost his master signifier, the *objet a* par excellence, in his father's death. His mourning is key for his continual constitution as a subject in the wake of the loss of the *objet a*, for mourning "operates in such a way as to make this [new] gap coincide with [...] the symbolic lack" (Lacan, "Desire," 40). The loss of Old Hamlet is the loss of the phallus and the symbolic must be remediated in light of this loss. Old Hamlet's passing bars the Other from Hamlet's access; the now "castrated father" can no longer carry the weight of the symbolic law (Lacan, "Desire," 44). Claudius earns Hamlet's ire for becoming Denmark's new phallus, though "one cannot strike the phallus, because the phallus, even the real phallus, is a *ghost*" (Lacan, "Desire," 50). This paradox explains Hamlet's delay as a function of his desire: drives are upset as the symbolic's constitution now stems from an object that Hamlet never took to be the *objet a*. Claudius forces himself on Denmark via the kingship as the phallus-that-cannot-live-up-to-Hamlet's-Phallus. The notion of impossibility detailed by the Ljubljana School compliments Lacan's reading: the *objet a* slides from Old Hamlet to Claudius because it was never with Old Hamlet to begin with, it was with the beyond-the-name-of-the-Father, the frustrating lack of sublimating the alienated Other.³

It bears noting that when he calls the real phallus a ghost, Lacan puns on Old Hamlet's re-emergence as a specter. This contradicts the earlier assertions that Hamlet is a subject, as it implies that he had a direct access to the phallus, a non-barred Other, during his father's life. No

³ This phallic analysis recurs in Oedipal readings of *Hamlet*, paradigmatically Ernest Jones' "The Oedipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive," though ascribing the totality of Hamlet's actions to an Oedipus complex ignores the layers of nothingness and metametatextuality at work in the later drama.

subject possesses this. On the other hand, if we are to read Hamlet as a subject, as one inevitably does when receiving his “I,” we must account for his past before the play’s beginning. Therefore, he cannot have had this mythical access to an unbarred Other. Lacan’s pregnant pun is misplaced.

This wrinkle aside, act one finds Hamlet a possibly impossible subject in the throes of mourning so that he might recalibrate his desire to its impossibility. It is not the time of impossible impossibility; matters seem quite “in-joint.” While the metatextual is at work since Hamlet’s first soliloquy at 1.2, the metametatextual does not seem to be (Shakespeare, 1.2.129-59). The events of the drama at this point give the reader no reason to doubt the frame of possible impossibility and no reason to understand that Hamlet’s metatextual address necessarily reaches beyond as it reflects back upon the scope of its fiction. It seems more likely that Hamlet is sharing frustrations with the reader that firmly correlate to the context that the text provides. Only the collapse of logical time that Hamlet undergoes at scene 1.5 induces Hamlet and the reader to impossible impossibility by forcing Hamlet’s reference of “I” to depend on the audience. From there, metametatextuality is necessary to reconcile the ensuing drama.

At 1.5, the Ghost appears in the likeness of Old Hamlet; by the scene’s end, Hamlet tells Horatio and Marcellus that “the time is out of joint. Oh, cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!” (Shakespeare, 1.5.197-8). This scene is the confrontation between Hamlet and the *undead* remnant of his father. Žižek demonstrates the *undead* to be that “third thing” which defies symbolic possibility and perturbs Hamlet’s meaning structure through its “obscene spirituality.” (333). This *undead* character is akin to the “‘death drive’ [as] the obscene persistence of life just going on, not even ready to follow its natural path and dissolve itself in death” (Žižek, 340). As an analytic hinge, the death drive pinpoints impossibility: it demonstrates

that even as the subject moves toward the nothingness at its constitution by way of the declination of desire, the life of the subject continues as the possible. The Ghost of Old Hamlet is the spectral emergence of this impossibility. He urges Hamlet to murder Claudius, as if the new king's death shall set things right. Despite this clear injunction to mediate his own melancholia, Hamlet leaves the encounter rattled out of logical time by virtue of his encounter with the obscene. By assigning responsibility of a disjointed time to himself, particularly claiming the responsibility through "I," he changes his dialectical reference. To return to Lacan's words on time, the moment for concluding the time of comprehension no longer lasts the instant of the glance. The emergence of impossibility as a specter makes it so that Hamlet cannot confirm his constitution of "I" through the other members of the court.

This juncture in the argument presents us with two possibilities. Depending on where we figure the reading in Hamlet's arrival at the out of joint, the remainder of the drama shall be read drastically differently. On one hand, we may claim that the reader is, in effect, merely an audience. The drama plays out on stage before us and the Ghost appears, impossible nothingness embodied, as an eerie reminder of the subject's nothingness. Hamlet's role in his own drama would then be that of the catalyst, whose misfortune to undergo the loss of the phallus and displacement by the impossible is a reminder of the negation that determines us all. To compliment this view (the established view), his sporadic thrusts of desire and indecision throughout the play's remainder would then lack the object correlate that Eliot sought, as Hamlet is the objective correlate to the wider drama of the analytic subject.

On the other hand, we may claim that the reader, even as an audience, cannot passively witness the drama. This second option proves more compelling. The reader's recognition of the time out-of-joint meaningfully transforms their experience of the text beyond mere witness.

Hamlet's constitution of "I" no longer depends on the text or its other characters, but upon the reader, upon *us*. The time-out-of-joint, then, is only legible at the level of the metametatextual: both the reader and Hamlet must move beyond the dialectic compression of "I" and into a new time, where meaning has been upset by the Ghost's obscenity. An examination of the metametatextual after 1.5 clarifies Hamlet's shift in dialectical dependence and the ways in which it gives the reader over to the impossible, too.

Consider Lacan's notion of the "*sujet supposé savoir*" (subject supposed to know) alongside his formula "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, "The Four," 232-235). The subject qua reader, in transference, must locate the Other in the author; this is the guarantee of the text's meaning. On the one hand, hundreds of years of debate over Shakespeare's identity confirm this. He is the man who cannot live up to the Name-of-the-Shakespeare. On the other hand, Hamlet demonstrates metatextual awareness across the play's entire span; he soliloquizes. As Lacan has it, "Hamlet *knows*" ("Desire," 19). Through this, he inherits Shakespeare's mythical claim to the Other. He is a residual of the author's voice. Yet, he may only lose this voice as he appeals to the Other via soliloquy. His claim to knowledge depends upon the Other as he sees it; this Other is none other than the reader that he addresses. The problem is this: if, as Lacan claims, we recognize that "Hamlet is constantly suspended at the time of the Other" and possesses the author's connection to it, how do we recognize that time? ("Desire," 17). For the soliloquy to register, we must seek its meaning in the Other. The Other is of course other to us, though the Other that Hamlet appeals to *is* us.

This is problematic; the Other is absolutely other and does not depend on meaning but is its elusive guarantee—or lack thereof. "*Il n'y a pas d'Autre de l'Autre*" (there is no Other to/of/for the Other). ("Desire," 25). So we cannot rely on some further Other to allow us to make

sense of Hamlet's words. We seek the Other to Hamlet's Other, but he is the Other for us and we for him. The situation is cyclical; no other Other steps in to save us from Hamlet's grasp for meaning beyond himself. The character who "knows" suddenly asks us from where his answers come, and the only answer is him, or at least the hidden part of him we assumed tapped into the Other. Through this convoluted chain of signifiers, the textual medium situates us at the maw of nothing, at a forever-deferred appeal to that missing thing that enables the symbolic superstructure itself. Reading Hamlet, making sense of his words, puts us at nothing for at least the duration of their utterance as we look toward the subject-supposed-to-know and see nothing.

This is nowhere truer than at 3.1, Hamlet's most famous soliloquy. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (Shakespeare, 3.1.59). This question is posable only at impossible impossibility, the place where the non-being of subject-supposed-to-know can register with us. At the state of possible impossibility, the question is a poetic appeal to the subject-nothingness. A possibly impossible reading holds that inquiring "to be or not to be" is not a meaningful questioning of the subject's being itself, but rather a meditation upon it through the auspices of reflection. Zupančič surmises this line of thought as she draws a connection between the soliloquy at 3.1 and a "third zone," the nothing that structures life and death. She makes use of its Shakespearian name, the rub:

"the very 'rub' upon which Hamlet's famous soliloquy dwells [...] is not (the thought of) death, but (the thought of) that which—in the same way as it haunts us in the sleep of life—might haunt us in the sleep of death" (Zupančič 91).

Notably, she supposes Hamlet's speech to dwell *upon*, as if the third zone is an object, bound by a dual-pronged assault from its theoretical articulation and the seeming possibility of subject life. After all, Hamlet is still there. He has desires, though he has trouble acting upon them, and exists.

Keeping in mind my detail of the metametatextual, the shortcomings of limiting Hamlet's soliloquy to a dwelling "upon" an impossibility become apparent. The object of the soliloquy is not an "object" in the slightest—to be able to read the question "to be or not to be" correctly is to understand it as a question with existential stakes. It is *not* merely a reflection upon the fact that the nothingness within the subject, the "not to be," is at kinship with and only-ever thinkable with the "to be," but rather it is a legitimate unmooring into impossibility that raises an actual choice to be made. "To be or not to be" must be considered, then, at metametatextuality.

I recall that meaning resides in the Other, as the discussion of sublimation and alienation demonstrated. The meaning of this utterance is no different. As alienation entails sublimation, each act of Hamlet's speech is an attempt to sublimate the symbolic order. Where or what is that which Hamlet attempts to sublimate through his question? It is no longer an appeal to the court, for the manifestation of the Ghost made futile the appeal to the other characters of the drama as the Other. Following metametatextuality, it seems that such an appeal for meaning must be to the reader. Of course, as we are subjects ourselves, we must defer to the Other to parse the question. Doing so results in the only reading we might take from the affair if we are to understand our deferment as that which Hamlet's question interrogates: a verbal brush with the impossibility at the subject's center.

The crucial break of my reading from others, insofar as it privileges the experience of impossibility over a meditation or theorization, comes apparent if we consider the reader's attempts to salvage Hamlet's subjectivity. The drama functioned before 1.5 by allowing Hamlet to ground his subjectivity among the other characters. Though he lost his father, he could communicate legibly, albeit moodily, with the courtiers. He also possessed an *objet a* in Ophelia, whom Lacan calls "*o*-phelia." Lacan reads Hamlet's distaste for her throughout the play

as a function of the fact that “Ophelia is at this point the phallus, exteriorized and rejected by the subject as a symbol signifying life” (“Desire,” 23). I add that Ophelia’s exteriorization does not precede the entrance into the out-of-joint at 1.5, so it seems that Hamlet’s later souring to her is a collateral of his temporal displacement.

Opheliac digressions aside, I turn back to the experience of impossibility: perhaps readers were a passive audience to the drama’s events back when Hamlet found his “I” among the other characters. This cannot be the case in the out-of-joint. Here, the result that must transpire within the moment of concluding, the moment at which the sense of the play and Hamlet’s constitution as dependent upon some symbolic guarantee registers for the reader, does not come to pass. The Other of Hamlet, if his appeal to the reader as the guarantor of his “I” maintains his subjectivity, is not the Other of the reader. And yet, as the knowing character in the text who inherits the Name-of-the-Shakespeare’s authorities, he must belie the Other for the reader. This is the impossible work of impossible impossibility. Any attempt at comprehension cannot conclude through the reader’s glance at Hamlet. The deferment of the apparently irreconcilable Others (Hamlet’s and the reader’s) embodies the out of joint and demonstrates the consequence of metametatextual awareness. Crucially, the reader cannot relegate Hamlet to *just* a facet of the text, dismissing his questioning and awareness as a product of the text. This awareness supersedes the text. Hamlet’s soliloquy at 3.1 is the complete loss of the subject-supposed-to-know due to the impossibilities of meaning at the metametatextual realm, a sinking beyond ontology into the obscene, allowing the subject to authentically question its existence.

This analysis fleshes out the earlier claim that metametatextuality situates the reader and Hamlet at impossible impossibility. For the remainder of the play, the two are in a bottomless symbiosis that escapes coherent theoretical proclamation by defeating any identification through

logical time. Only the end of the drama brings impossible impossibility's dissolution and the return to possible impossibility. A proper understanding of what happens before the curtain falls cannot be found in a post-reading analysis; there is something key in the out-of-joint facilitated by the drama, a nothingness that cannot be adequately theorized but whose emergent conditions and effects must be understood to understand *Hamlet*. The unravelling of the drama occurs in the out-of-joint with both Hamlet and the reader at impossible impossibility; the impossibility of the subject at last embodies its mundane experience as logical time fails to establish. It follows that a similar non-instance of metatextual deferment occurs at every pass in the out-of-joint. I have not the space to expound them all. Instead, I will resituate a few key moments throughout the drama alongside the metatextual's implications. Through this, I will demonstrate that Hamlet's procession through the impossible, which is also the reader's, frustrates his goals. It is ultimately the reader that sustains Hamlet in his frustrations and the reader who must, in the wake of the drama's ambiguous ending, reconcile Hamlet's tragedy with their own subjectivity.

The Inadequacy of Synthesis

First, I turn to the soliloquy at 2.2, in which Hamlet curses that he “must like a whore unpack my heart with words” (Shakespeare, 2.2.586). Hamlet's condemnation of words conveys his intimacy with the impossibility of nothingness. This is his desperation at the metatextual; he is notoriously hesitant to act and caught at verbiage. As far his action in the out of joint may be characterized, it consists of enacting the “antic disposition” from 1.5 onward so that he might continue interaction with the other characters (Shakespeare, 1.5.181). His language of false madness focuses intentionally upon the ambiguities and the holes in symbolic meanings, those meanings which a Lacanian construct refers to as “vacillation” (Lacan, *The Four*, 25). Inhabiting logical time's non-sense (its impossible undercurrent) from his new minting outside of logical

time approximates Hamlet's only method of maintaining adjacency to possibly impossible subjects. Since Hamlet's subjectivity is now suspended in his appeals to the reader, he must communicate with the other characters by gesticulating at the nothingness he finds himself submerged in. In all scenes, he finds an outlet to soliloquy and snarky asides, continuously constituting his subjectivity at the out of joint. He may only express himself through vacillations. In this way, Hamlet remains within the drama even as his subjectivity is necessarily maintained by appeals outside of it.

The only scene in which Hamlet himself makes no telling appeals outside of the text is 3.4, in which he confronts his mother and kills Polonius. This scene, which at first glance lacks an appeal to the reader, does not threaten my argument. Rather, if read with 3.3 as an attempt to fulfill the Ghost's injunction from the time-out-of joint, it affirms it. Before he departs to his mother's chambers, Hamlet consecrates himself in soliloquy: "Soft, now to my mother. / O heart, lose not thy nature" (Shakespeare, 3.2.391-2). As he appeals to his mother, he invokes Old Hamlet as a symbolic structurer, the phallus to which she should adhere: "O shame, where is thy blush?" (Shakespeare, 3.4.82). The Ghost then reappears, revitalizing the insistent futility of its entreaty and reinstating the obscenity of the out of joint. This occurs immediately after Hamlet stabs an unknown bulge (the phantom Polonius) behind a curtain. He stabs nothing, in hopes that killing an undead nothing would reduce it to what it truly should be: nothing. He failed, killing only the court's blithering elder statesman.

This scene follows 3.3, in which Hamlet opts (via soliloquy) not to murder Claudius. The events in his mother's bedroom find Hamlet able to punish only nothingness. Lacan offers an explanation for this sequence that proves insufficient: "it's not time. It's not the hour of the Other: not time for the Other to render his 'audit' to heaven [...] Whatever Hamlet may do, he

will only do it at the hour of the Other.” (“Desire,” 18). Lacan’s reading presupposes Hamlet stuck in mourning for Old Hamlet and at the auspices of Claudius (or the phallic correspondent thereof) for his new master signifier; understanding metametatextuality complicates matters. Granted, Hamlet still depends upon the time of the Other to act, but the issue is more accurately that there will be no advent of this time, since the Other he seeks is the reader, the Other the reader seeks is him, and so on.

Such paralysis is metametatextuality’s work on the drama. Quite simply, Hamlet cannot do what he wants in the light of impossibility because of his dependence upon the reader. His ethical responsibility to “set it right” sputters and sublimation is impossible (as it always is, but now Hamlet and the reader *know* it is). Metametatextuality, a consequence of the Ghost’s manifestation, guarantees Hamlet’s inaction, for all action he does take will self-evidently fall into the nothingness that is so present to him. The subject-supposed-to-know can no longer access any meaning for his action. Reading metametatextuality gives way to a new understanding of Hamlet’s inertness. From this inertness, the play’s conclusion follows his attempts to extricate himself from this ethical mire. Such efforts turn out to embed the reader even deeper into impossible impossibility. To frame Hamlet’s failed attempts to absolve himself of nothing and his metametatextual dependence on the reader, I move to his most spirited attempt at self-reclamation.

The Reader in the Wake

Hamlet climaxes at Hamlet’s attempt to ingratiate himself back to the logical time of the dramatic characters. He swears to the reader at 4.4 that he shall no longer allow himself to be undercut by nothingness, even as his appeal as subject to the reader offers no coherent answer to

“How stand I, then [?]” (Shakespeare, 4.4.57). The encounter at Yorick’s grave offers some sort of coherent hope to his desire to return to possibility. Žižek says it best:

“Hamlet rids himself of the ghost toward the end of the play when, over a fresh grave, he contemplates the skull (i.e. dead bone) of his beloved clown Yorick – only such confrontation with materiality at its most inert can purify the obscene spirituality of the ghost” (333).

Žižek’s analysis privileges the phenomenal event, the subject’s witness. Lacan casts aspersions upon this realm, insisting that “in this matter of the visible, everything is a trap.” (*The Four*, 93). He claims that “what I look at is never what I wish to see,” and develops the “gaze” as the visual function by which the Other pierces through even the realm of phenomenal experience. (Lacan, *The Four*, 103). As Hamlet relies upon the reader as the Other, the “spirit as bone,” death’s nothingness at the material, cannot be sufficient to restore Hamlet to possible impossibility. (Žižek, 333). The bone that Hamlet encounters reminds him of the jester Yorick. His speech extolling Yorick’s “infinite jest” seems fully grounded within the time of the drama, not beyond it: Hamlet recounts his childhood and speaks at length to Horatio, not the reader (Shakespeare, 5.1.183-95). For a deceptive moment, impossible impossibility falls to the wayside. Hamlet cannot, however, see that which he wishes to see: Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes enter for Ophelia’s burial and Hamlet becomes disgruntled. He immediately snaps back to his address of the reader: “Here comes the King, / The Queen, the courtiers. Who is this they follow? And with such maimed rites?” (Shakespeare, 5.1.217-9). While it might be argued that he is speaking here to Horatio, I note that the stilted hyperbole of his narration cannot help but clue the reader into the plot.

Even after Yorick and the spirit as bone appeared to briefly return Hamlet to possible impossibility, he turns right back to the audience at the court’s arrival, unable to confront its members at the textual level. It seems that after Hamlet and the reader transgress the out of joint,

all of the Dane's efforts to leave that time can only operate within it, making them futile. Hamlet retains his inscrutable smokescreen of madness through the play's end; even his final apology to Laertes must take the form of a declaration to "this audience" (Shakespeare, 5.2.238). Hamlet is trapped at his endless deferment to the reader.

If he is to resolve the entanglement, Hamlet's tries at recovering the subject's possibility must land somewhere aside from an appeal to the reader. Following his encounter with the skull, we can read an apparent follow-through to a sliver of possibility recovered by inert materiality. When Hamlet returns from exile (a return that coincides with his attempted return from the out-of-joint), his reintroduction at Ophelia's funeral attempts an address of the characters within the text:

“*[coming forward]* What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane” (Shakespeare, 5.1.254-58).

He reintroduces himself before the court as “I, Hamlet the Dane” in an attempt to reconstitute himself through a glance at the play's other subjects by asserting his claim to Ophelia. And yet, the theatrical mode of this claim, its grandiose role as an impartial declaration before the other characters rather than an interpersonal communication with them, knowingly strings the reader along. All of his speech is so persistently drenched in metametatextuality that even his attachment to the former *o*-phelia cannot leave the reader behind in favor of a time-in-joint. The fulfillment of his desire to avenge his father can never assert itself over and against the metametatextual character that the revelation of this very desire inspired. Hamlet will never execute the Ghost's ethical injunction.

Hamlet's failures to restore himself to logical time are only one side of the coin. The reader undergoes an ethical frustration to mirror Hamlet's. The reciprocal deferment that metametatextuality uncovered entails this, seeing as the reader is at impossible impossibility, too. The remainder of my study will analyze the experience of the reader's impossible impossibility. This may seem difficult, as this elusive experience vanishes at the play's conclusion, apparently always-already accounted for when time is back in-joint. It is tempting to think that the play is over, the impossible specter is gone, and we have plenty of time for analysis. However, focusing on impossible impossibility's alleged vanishment by analyzing the play's final scene proves to be the best way to recognize impossible impossibility, the reader's experience of it, and the lasting effects thereof. This recognition raises challenges for how the reader can navigate their subjectivity, pins down the geneses of Lacanian theory's attempts at nothing, and opens new questions of subjectivity and metametatextuality. To get there, I begin with a succinct analysis of Hamlet's final engagement, the duel.

The duel is a symbolically structured ritual that Hamlet subjects himself to. He reflects that "there is special / providence in the fall of a sparrow [...] the readiness is all" after Horatio reminds him that it may be a trap (Shakespeare, 5.2.217-20). The duel is indeed a trap, and amidst its bloody fallout Hamlet discovers that the murder of Claudius cannot restore him to a possible impossibility. As he dies, he directly addresses the reader, urging a consideration of his ultimate failure to navigate the impossibility that he and the reader opened through their deferring dependence on one another. Hamlet's final moments will prove crucial to understanding what, if anything, happens to the reader's impossibly impossible state:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—

But let it be. (Shakespeare, 5.2.217-20)

Hamlet claims to the reader that he *knows* until the very end. In the last analysis, there is an unresolved tension between taking the encounter with Yorick as an absolute assertion of the spirit as bone and the fact that even being literally pierced by Claudius' phallus (Laertes' sword) cannot conclude Hamlet's arc through the impossible. This un-resolution persists because the reader still relies upon the text to guarantee Hamlet's appeal of knowledge beyond it even as Hamlet relies upon the reader. The duel is the hour of the Other (that Lacan prophesized) as a game organized by the phallus (Claudius), but it does not truly resolve impossibility.

Perhaps this is to be expected, since psychoanalytic theory never allows for a complete sublimation; impossible nothingness is endemic to the subject's condition. Critics such as Eliot, who impugn *Hamlet's* apparent lack of measurable action or emotional arc, misunderstand that this lack is actually an authentic insight into human experience. Additionally, Hamlet's lingering claim to *know* could be taken as a suitable objective correlate to the forever lingering Other, to the nothingness at the heart of all of our somethingness. Such analysis, of course, occurs only after the out-of-joint. In the out-of-joint, what is given to Hamlet manifests to the reader as well: the impossibility of Hamlet's desire. He depends on the reader as an active force for the meaning of the metatextual. Nowhere is this dependence and its effects on the reader more soluble than in his final entreaty: "let it be."

Let it be - where? And what is "it"? *It* can, for the bedeviled reader, be only the summation of the metatextual's confusion. "Let it be" is a phrase that, in consideration of the metatextual, unlocks the lasting power of impossible impossibility without burying it in possibly impossible theorization. The injunction to do something with "it," Hamlet's uncanny knowledge, is a conclusion defined by the inability of the reader to fulfill what the task asks of

them. “It” is left nowhere to be, and to let it be is thus for the reader to accept their ultimate powerlessness. They cannot give the Dane what he so desperately appeals to them for and certainly cannot make something out of his nothing. The metametatextual sinks the possibility of a coherent analytic reading and instead inundates the reader with the experience of the subject’s impossibility—impossible impossibility. The last words of the drama’s titular subject land on a symbol whose correspondence in the Other is completely opaque—“let it be” cannot be understood and, paradoxically, confronting that in-scrutiny is the only way to render it legible. Thus, the reader is also deprived the catharsis of conclusion, of the neatly fashioned objective correlate that Eliot pined for. Nothingness and impossibility are not abstract derivations but in the very experience of reading the text and entering impossible impossibility. The play’s finale works at the level of artistry and pathos because the reader experiences the impossible anguish over impossibility through their own futility before the metametatextual deferment. At the time of Hamlet’s death, the impossible impossibility’s vanishment turns out to be no more than its continuation. Hamlet’s engagement to the reader persists even after the supposed nothingness of death; he becomes, like his father, a lasting testament to obscenity.

If there is a time the reader can leave impossible impossibility behind, it comes after Hamlet’s death. Fortinbras’ arrival to Denmark is the play’s transition out of the endless deferment between Hamlet and the reader. His command to “Go bid the soldiers shoot” offers the reader a chance to wash their hands of the matter (Shakespeare, 5.2.405). Though the mutual dependence between text and reader that makes up the metametatextual has not vanished, the reader watches a mourning ritual on Hamlet’s behalf and transitions back to their logical time.

Even this transition does not erase, only resubmerges, the reality of the impossibly impossible experience the reader endured along Hamlet; there is still much for us to make of it.

Always reading, never merely watching, the reader's active ascription of meaning unto the text as the text looked to the reader for that same meaning guaranteed their passage through the impossible alongside Hamlet. My treatment of Hamlet's metatextuality demonstrates the metametatextual as the mysterious core of *Hamlet's* enduring sway as the "first drama of modern subjectivity" (Žižek, 241). In that sense, Lacanian commentators on *Hamlet* are correct; the play certainly treats the impossibility at the heart of the subject, and Žižek's and Zupančič's readings particularly demonstrate the importance of nothing in *Hamlet*. All of them miss, however, that this nothingness does not surface as a reflection or correlate to some more authentic subjective process that the play aesthetically crystallizes. This nothingness is the reading of the play and the psychoanalytic theory is the objective correlate that comes from that nothingness. The veracity of the reading experience, which must transpire by the presence of the metametatextual even if a given analyst does not reflect upon it as such, is the guarantor of truth to analytic theories of the subject's nothing. To truly comprehend the construction of this experience, it must be carefully uncovered, and illogical time must be reopened. This is precisely what this paper has aimed to accomplish.

My reflection raises new questions in two major areas: how reading the metametatextual will continue to change understandings of *Hamlet* and subjectivity, and whether the metametatextual may be applied outside of *Hamlet*. To the latter: do all instances of metatextuality breed a metametatextual layer, or is there something of Hamlet's *knowing* metatextuality that does so? Pushing this question would require deepening engagement with *Hamlet's* metametatextual on the one hand and on the other identifying the metametatextual's formative, clandestine presence in various texts. Both matters fall outside my present inquiry.

As for the former, there is slightly more to say here: what does the recognition of metametatextuality allow us to ask about Hamlet's readers as subjects who have experienced impossible impossibility? We must now see that Prince Hamlet's ghost persists with us, even after the play's end and the return of the time-in-joint. If Hamlet's impossibility is our impossibility, it seems the same shortcomings he faced should remain with us, the readers; namely, his inability to fulfill his desires even as he sourced and ascribed them to the Other. Why and how should we pursue our desires in the wake of our impossible witness? Does our experiential, impossibly impossible recognition of the impossibility change its content? Does this changed content necessitate a change in the way we possibly conduct ourselves, or is there something to be said for a question that is its answer and is therefore endless, like the thrust of the drive? For now, these questions are impenetrable. After all, the only answer we have for "to be or not to be?" is a non-answer: "let it be." And "it" is nothing.

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