A Divided Emancipation: The Alienation of the Modern Tragic Hero

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Abstract: What separates the ancient tragic hero from the modern is the alienation evinced in the modern figure. The contrast between Antigone's obedience to her ancestor and Hamlet's questioning of his dead father makes clear this split. The alienation evident in modern tragedy provides the basis for emancipation because it reveals how subjectivity cannot coincide with the injunctions of any form of social authority, even that which challenges the ruling order.

Keywords: modernity, tragedy, Antigone, Hamlet, emancipation

Breaking Up With Oneself

Emancipation is only on the table in the modern universe. It involves subjectivity breaking from the hold that the authority of tradition has over it. This break requires the subject to recognize that it doesn't fit within the social order that it inhabits. Seeing the mismatch between subjectivity and the social order is the sine qua non of emancipation, and this mismatch becomes visible only in the modern universe, where displacement becomes evident throughout society. Modernity confronts subjectivity with the alienation that traditional society obscures. The illusion of belonging entraps subjectivity within the external determinations that frame its existence. Alienation, in contrast, separates the speaking subject from itself and allows it to act against the external factors that would otherwise determine its existence. It is only the subject aware of its alienation that can participate in the project of emancipation. Modernity does not have a monopoly on alienation. But alienation can only be genuinely emancipatory when we recognize it.

The destruction of the illusion of belonging to the social order and its tradition is the great accomplishment of modernity. The inventions of modern science and the innovations of modern art demonstrate that the subject sticks out from its world. Modernity frees the subject to experience the alienation that defines it as a speaking being by making evident the distance that separates the subject from the identity that purports to define the subject. As modern science displaces the subject from its position within creation, modern art reveals the ramifications of this displacement in aesthetic form. Modern tragedy shows the alienated subject as the figure capable of defying its social position and even itself.

This separates modern tragedy from even the greatest ancient tragedies, such as Sophocles' *Antigone*. Unlike her modern counterparts, Antigone knows what she must do and does it. She never doubts the rightness of burying her brother Polyneices, nor does she ever question how she goes about doing her duty, even when it engenders catastrophe for herself and the entirety of Thebes. Duty is unequivocal.[1] From the first

1 The motivation for Antigone's act gives it its ethical bearing. She doesn't simply disobey the law

scene of Sophocles' tragedy, Antigone commits herself to an ethical act with such vehemence that the whole force of the legal authority that Creon marshals cannot dissuade her from this commitment. Nothing that happens subsequently causes Antigone to question her motivations or her judgment. Antigone's absence of self-doubt enables her to be the model of ethical comportment for many interpreters of the play.[2] But this absence of self-doubt separates Antigone definitively from the modern epoch. Her inability to question herself prevents her from being a figure of emancipation.

Antigone's refusal of doubt is evident from the first scene of *Antigone*. In this scene, she makes no allowance for the legitimate questions that her sister Ismene poses. Instead, after Antigone briefly lays out the situation for Ismene, she says categorically, "That is the new trouble. And now you can prove / who you are: good sister or coward / and disgrace to our brave ancestors."[3] Antigone's statement leaves no wiggle room for Ismene to reconcile herself with Creon's law. But at the same time, Antigone appeals to a duty that they have to the authority of the past. They must act in accordance with the demands that tradition makes on them as opposed to following the ruling law of the land. Despite the radicality of Antigone's act, she cannot formulate this act in terms of a break from tradition. Although Sophocles shows Antigone revolting against Creon, he never depicts her departing from the tradition that she inherits. The primary barrier to her autonomy is her inability to glimpse her disjunctive relationship to the society.

The contrast between Antigone and Shakespeare's major tragic heroes reveals that emancipation relies on alienation. Unlike Sophocles, Shakespeare emphasizes the distance that exists between the forces of the social order and the tragic hero, a distance that the heroes themselves grasp. Antigone's single-minded determination to act stands out from the barrage of internal questions that modern tragic

for the sake of disobeying the law. She transgresses Creon's law in order to preserve the singularity of Polyneices, a singularity that the law overruns. Polyneices takes up arms against his own land, which is what prompts Creon to forbid his burial. But Antigone doesn't recognize the law's authority to go this far. She defends Polyneices against the law going too far. As Jacques Lacan points out, "Antigone's position represents the radical limit that affirms to unique value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polyneices may have done, or to whatever he may be subjected to" (Lacan 1992, p. 279).

2 In her discussion of *Antigone*, Joan Copjec clarifies what the play and the character reveal about the subject's irreducibility to its conditions. This irreducibility is the basis for freedom. If the conditions in which we exist determine us, we cannot be free. According to Copjec, "Because the law contains this mad excess where it loses its head, as it were, the subject can carry out the law or carry on the family name without simply repeating in the present what has already been forseen and dictated by the past" (Copjec 2002, p. 45). Antigone is not simply what her social order makes of her. Her excessive response to the law that Creon lays down reveals the excess within the law itself, the law's failure to coincide with itself.

3 Sophocles 2007, p. 3.

heroes unleash on themselves. Emancipation becomes a possibility in the modern universe because alienation becomes evident to the subject itself—and modern tragedy makes this alienation manifest to the spectator.

Questionable Demands

Shakespeare wrote his four most important tragedies at the beginning of the modern epoch. It is not coincidental that the first of these, *Hamlet*, was first performed in 1600, the date that symbolically marks the dawn of modernity. Along with *Hamlet*, the other major tragedies—*Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—all take the alienation of the subject in modernity as their primary focus. Characters in these plays are capable of tragic grandeur thanks to their inability to fit in their world or to achieve harmony with themselves. Shakespeare illustrates the possibility for emancipation by insisting on the necessity of alienation. Even when the characters in Shakespeare's tragedies are diabolically evil, this evil stems from a fundamental disjunction that becomes apparent in the modern universe. When one contrasts *Hamlet* with *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Othello* with *Ajax*, it quickly becomes clear that the sense of what constitutes the tragedy has dramatically changed with the birth of modernity. Shakespeare's tragic heroes evince a self-division that the single-minded heroes of Sophocles do not. They cannot simply follow the dictates of the gods as Antigone does. Instead, modern subjects must question what they can believe no matter what authority articulates what they must do. There are clear oppositions in the world of Sophocles—between Antigone and Creon, between Electra and Clytemnestra—but there are internal contradictions in the universe of Shakespeare. He stands at the beginning of the modern epoch as beacon showing that alienation is not a situation to be overcome but the basis for freedom.

Shakespeare's panegyric to alienation is most evident in *Hamlet*, the first of the great tragedies. Hamlet is a figure of self-doubt and self-critique. His division from himself stands out and enables his distance from the dictates of the social order in which he exists. Toward the beginning of the play, he receives an order from his dead father, the ultimate figure of symbolic authority.[4] But rather than embark straightaway on carrying out the dead king's command to kill the usurper Claudius, Hamlet questions the source of the order, how properly to obey if the authority is legitimate, and his own status as a royal son. The ancient hero Antigone knows what she must do—bury her brother Polyneices despite the ruler Creon prohibiting this act under penalty of

4 When Hamlet first appears, we see his distance from the current ruling authority in Denmark, his uncle Claudius. While everyone else celebrates, Hamlet remains aloof and insists on his distance from Claudius and his mother who has married him.

death—and quickly does it. Hamlet, in contrast, relates to his duty and to himself from a distance.

Hamlet's alienation is the source of his refusal to act promptly and slay Claudius immediately. All the critical energy caught up in solving the problem of Hamlet's inaction fails to recognize self-doubt and self-questioning as the modern forms of action. We should not see them as inaction but rather as ways to act. No matter how convincing we might find a certain explanation of Hamlet's delay, conceiving of the play in terms of a delay misses how the alienated subject acts.[5] It doesn't act through self-certainty but through a self-laceration that divides the subject from its social situation just as it divides it from itself.[6] Hamlet is a modern subject because he acts by questioning the figure of symbolic authority and his own identity that receives its support from this figure.

Toward the beginning of the play, Hamlet expresses both his own alienation and the generalized alienation of the world in which he exists. The play articulates this with reference to temporality that no longer appears to operate as it should. Hamlet states, "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right."[7] In one sense, Hamlet refers here to the disorder that Claudius unleashes when he kills Hamlet's father and marries his mother. The world is out of joint for him specifically. But in another sense, Hamlet speaks for the modern subject as such. There is no modern subject for whom time is not out of joint: the homelessness of universal alienation becomes evident for everyone, not just for those with murdered fathers. Although Hamlet talks here about setting time right, his actions indicate that he does not believe in restoring a premodern sense of place. At no point in the play does Hamlet abandon the act of questioning that defines his modern subjectivity. His salient characteristic is his defiance of the authority of tradition, an authority that those who flee their alienation seek as a refuge.

The subject as such receives its orders from tradition, just as the ghost of Hamlet's father commands Hamlet to avenge his death by his killing his murderer Claudius. But the modern subject, in contrast to the

5 Once one accepts the hypothesis of a delay, Sigmund Freud offers the most convincing explanation for it. His interpretation, developed initially in a footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, receives a fuller treatment in Jones 1976. According to Freud and Jones, Hamlet delays because he unconsciously desires to do what Claudius has done—namely, to kill his father and have sex with his mother.

6 In an essay that recognizes Hamlet's act taking place throughout the play, Walter Davis argues that the entirety of the play consists in Hamlet attacking Claudius (and every other character) psychically to force them to confront the trauma of their own subjectivity. Davis states, "Shakespeare put in the soliloquy [when Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius …] so that even the groundlings in academe would see what Hamlet has been doing all along, torturing everyone psychologically, murdering people the way his true successor Iago does, by planting poison in their psyches then watching it work" (Davis 2011, p. 280).

7 Shakespeare 1997a, act 1, scene 5, lines 188-189.

subject of tradition, can respond with doubt rather than with obedience. Rather than trust the figure of paternal authority, Hamlet questions this authority, and his response leads to further questions about the significance of existence itself. The defiance of traditional authority produces a cascading series of doubts that transform Hamlet into an exemplar of subjectivity. The articulation of a question at the site where tradition demands obedience reveals the gap in which subjectivity exists. Hamlet cannot respond to his father's demand in the way that he should because he already senses that he doesn't fully belong to the world of his father. His questioning evinces his alienation from the world in which he exists.

Hamlet's incessant questioning defines his rejection of the authority of the paternal injunction. He questions in lieu of obeying, and this questioning signals his allegiance to modernity. Shakespeare never shows Hamlet rediscovering a place within tradition during the play. Instead, he sticks out as a figure alienated from the tradition that attempts to give him a clearly defined place. His questioning does not preclude ultimately acting. When Hamlet does act and kill Claudius, Shakespeare does not present this act as the fulfillment of the destiny that his father gave to him, which is why the ghost of Hamlet's father is nowhere to be seen before, during, or after the death of Claudius. Although his father's ghost does return after his original visitation to remind Hamlet of his duty, he is absent in the play's decisive last scene. Hamlet kills Claudius as one alienated from the destiny that the father gives to him. When it comes finally to killing Claudius, it is entirely Hamlet's act because his questioning divorces this act from the authority that initially commands it. He acts without relying on any authority, but he does act rather than just content himself with rebellion because Shakespeare understands that alienation requires that the subject take responsibility for its own actions. Hamlet cannot turn questioning into its own form of symbolic identity as so many do when they challenge figures of authority. The absence of Hamlet's father while Hamlet accomplishes the act makes clear that Shakespeare never abandoned the break that he inaugurated in the play.[8] We never return from the alienated subject of modernity to the assurances of traditional authority.

The enduring popularity of *Hamlet* derives from its status as the exemplary modern work. Although people throughout modernity attempt to take refuge in a symbolic identity, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare shows the impossibility of finding any refuge there. The attempt to do so always fails, as Hamlet's demeanor relative to the other characters in the play

8 One could imagine an alternate ending of *Hamlet* in which the ghost appeared on the stage with a satisfied look on his face just after the death of Claudius. If George Lucas had written *Hamlet*, this would surely have been the result, mirroring the miraculous appearance of the ghosts of Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness), Yoda (Frank Oz), and Anakin Skywalker (Sebastian Shaw) at the conclusion of Richard Marquand's *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

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reveals. Hamlet's refusal to rely on his symbolic identity as a basis for acting offers a paradigm for modernity that simultaneously exposes the failure of any such investment. The modern subject can try to invest itself in symbolic identity, but Hamlet shows why this is not going to work out.

From Ethics to Evil

There are two figures who highlight alienated subjectivity in *Othello*—Othello and Iago. Neither of these figures stay where the social order places them. Neither fit within the symbolic identity assigned to them. Both use signification to challenge their social position, even though they seem completely opposed to each other. Othello acts with integrity to defend the established order, while Iago works diligently to upend it. But their trajectories overlap through their shared defiance of place, their shared expression of the subject's alienation.

As a military leader, Othello upholds the structure of Venetian society. But while prosecuting the interests of this society, he ends up frequenting the houses of the society's elites, including that of Brabantio. This leads to a romance between Othello and Brabantio's daughter Desdemona, a romance that challenges the racist proclivities of the society that Othello defends. As a Moor, Othello doesn't appear as a proper son-in-law Brabantio's eyes. His romance defies the structure of the social order, but it also works against Othello's own interests by putting him at odds with the society he defends as a military leader. His love for Desdemona augments Othello's alienation from his society and from himself. It ultimately portends his self-destruction after he kills her for an imagined infidelity.

The play villain, Iago, leads Othello to self-destruction by taking advantage of Othello's alienated status. The play involves Iago persuading Othello that Desdemona is cheating on him with Michael Cassio. Because he knows that he does not fit in the social order, Othello becomes susceptible to Iago's appeals to jealousy about Desdemona and Cassio, even though they are not romantically involved with each other. Iago's awareness of Othello's alienation gives him the upper hand on Othello, who never suspects Iago of duplicity because Iago proclaims himself to be honest. Iago grasps how alienation structures subjectivity and relations between people. He uses this knowledge to destroy the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.

The appeal of Iago as a character derives from his insight into successful deception. He plants the seeds of doubt about Desdemona within Othello's psyche while at the same time proclaiming that there is nothing suspicious going on. This double gesture works perfectly on Othello due to Othello's naïve relationship to signification. Iago states, "When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with

heavenly shows, / As I do now."[9] Everything that Iago says to Othello evinces a distance between what he says and what he desires. Othello doesn't catch on to Iago's duplicity until after he kills Desdemona for her supposed infidelity. He can't recognize the primary fact of alienation and its consequences for all his interactions. But in his final speech he demonstrates that he dies with an awareness of his alienation that escaped him throughout his life.

At the end of his life, Othello relates to himself from a distance. He has absolute loathing for himself. The subject that permits Iago to deceive him and betrays his love for Desdemona is a subject that now merits only contempt. Othello kills this subject by killing himself. As he does so, he proclaims, "I took by th' throat the circumcised dog / And smote him—thus."[10] This is Othello's moment of self-transcendence, a transcendence that alienation makes possible. In smiting himself, Othello reveals that he grasps the ramifications of his self-division in a way that he hasn't before. At the end of the play, he finally embraces his status as an alienated subject. The play emphasizes the embrace of alienation as the foundation of modern subjectivity in this final gesture.

In contrast with Othello, Iago has a clear awareness of alienated subjectivity. He knows that signification necessarily distorts what we say, that our actions are always misperceived, and that no one can overcome self-division. And yet, he takes up this insight in the service of evil rather than ethics or political emancipation. His evil does not result from a failure to take alienation into account but rather from integrating the inescapability of alienation into his conception of subjectivity. The figure of Iago represents an omnipresent possibility in modernity. Awareness of alienation does not only open up the possibility for emancipation. It also creates the ground—or the lack of ground—for unspeakable evil.

Iago's evil is not banal.[11] He does not instrumentalize his evil acts, using them to achieve some larger aim. Iago is a figure of diabolical evil, someone who performs evil not to accomplish some hidden interest but just for its own sake. Diabolical evil is evil done for the sake of evil. In the case of diabolical evil, as Kant would have it, the subject has "an absolutely evil will" and makes "resistance to the law" its reason for

9 Shakespeare, 1997b, act 2, scene 3, lines 351-353.

10 Shakespeare 1997b, act 5, scene 2, lines 355-356.

11 Hannah Arendt famously labels Adolf Eichmann's brand of evil banal in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. While she is surely wrong to take at face value Eichmann's claim that he was just a party functionary with no animus toward Jews, we can see in her insistence on the banality of his evil a political effort to bar Eichmann from reaching the status of Iago or Vautrin (in Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*). Arendt states, "It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period" (Arendt 2006, p. 287-288). For Arendt, to categorize Eichmann as a figure of diabolical evil is to credit Nazism with a transcendence that it cannot achieve.

acting as it does.[12] The subject of diabolical evil enjoys being evil, which is exactly what one could say about Iago.

Although he brings up diabolical evil as a theoretical possibility, Kant quickly dismisses it as an impossible position for the subject to take up. He doesn't believe that a subject can will evil for its own sake. As Kant sees it, there is radical evil—trying to do good for the wrong reasons—but there is no diabolical evil—not trying to do good at all. It's clear that Kant's insight into moral philosophy suffers from him not having read *Othello* or not having met Hannibal Lecter. Through the character of Iago, Shakespeare offers a convincing portrait of someone adopting an evil will. This is a possibility that exists as a result of the subject's alienation. Kant's dismissal of this possibility leads him to miss how diabolical evil helps to clarify the project of political emancipation.[13]

Because Iago achieves the heights of diabolical evil, he reveals the limitations of this position relative to that of emancipation. In contrast to the emancipatory position, there is a clear absence of freedom in what Iago does. His actions require Michael Cassio and Othello as the enemies opposed to him. Iago needs enemies to undermine. Without them, his diabolical evil would have no way to realize itself. He couldn't act evilly, a fact that contrasts his activity with the freedom of emancipation, which does without any enemies. Emancipation takes universal alienation as its point of departure and sees its own self-division in that of the other. For this reason, it doesn't require enemies. Iago's diabolical evil cannot go this far and thus remains stuck in unfreedom. He doesn't reach the heights that Cordelia does in *King Lear*.

The Impossibility of Retiring

It is Lear, not Hamlet, who is Shakespeare's ultimate figure of indecision. At the beginning of *King Lear*, Lear expresses a wish to step outside of alienated subjectivity and enjoy a comfortable retirement. The problem is that there is no such thing as a comfortable retirement for the subject. No matter how earnestly one attempts to withdraw from the problems of existence (or the intrigue of the kingdom, in the case of Lear), one inevitably finds oneself involved. The subject's self-division results in its engagement with the social order, an engagement that survives

12 Kant 1996, p. 82.

13 Alenka Zupančič contends that Kant disallows diabolical evil to protect his own version of morality. According to Zupančič, the Kantian moral act is formally indistinguishable from diabolical evil. In *Ethics of the Real*, she writes, "Following Kant—but at the same time going against Kant—we thus propose to assert explicitly that *diabolical evil, the highest evil, is indistinguishable from the highest good, and that they are nothing other than the definitions of an accomplished (ethical) act*. In other words, at the level of the structure of the ethical act, the difference between good and evil does not exist. At this level, evil is formally indistinguishable from good" (Zupančič 2000, p. 92).

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all efforts at retirement.[14] *King Lear* is a play about the impossibility of escaping one's alienation through an act of withdrawal. Although alienation provides the path to emancipation, it does so by thrusting one inescapably into a confrontation.

In the first act of the play, Lear takes his leave of running the kingdom by passing the authority over to his daughters. To decide how to divide the kingdom, he asks each daughter to tell him how much they love him. The opening sets up a contest of flattery, but the game is fixed from the beginning. Lear has a clear favorite, Cordelia, on whom he plans to bestow the greatest share. All she needs to do is to say what he expects to hear from her. But the contest doesn't come off in the way that he expects.

Lear fails to understand that he and his interlocutors are all subjects of language—and thus alienated from what they say. He aspires to a straightforward statement of desire that cannot exist. When he demands expressions of love from each of his daughters, he receives sycophancy from his two disingenuous daughters, Goneril and Regan. Cordelia, who genuinely loves him, recognizes that subjects cannot express themselves directly, especially on command in front of a crowd. Any such statement would inevitably have its motivation in the desire for winning favor, not in love. Her response disappoints Lear because it avoids the rhetorical flourish of her sisters. Her love for her father prevents her from articulating it in the way that he demands.

While Lear suffers from failing to recognize the alienated status of subjectivity, Cordelia evinces a profound awareness of it. She shows her love for Lear specifically by not turning this love into a performance. The indirection of her speech is requisite given the alienation of her subjectivity within signification. She tells her father, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent."[15] When Lear reproves Cordelia for her lack of expressiveness, she doubles down on her refusal to make a direct statement. Cordelia continues, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less."[16] It is Cordelia's alienation—and her recognition of herself as an alienated subject—that prevents her from heaving her heart into her mouth and speaking like her sisters do.

Cordelia's refusal to betray her alienated status and present herself as identical with her symbolic status make her the hero of *King Lear*. She refuses to act as if she can be reduced to the position of

14 What Lear says that he wants, "To shake all cares and business from our age," is impossible for the speaking subject (Shakespeare 1997c, act 1, scene 1, line 39). The subject cannot exempt itself from cares because it is always outside of itself in the world that it inhabits.

15 Shakespeare 1997c, act 1, scene 1, line 62.

16 Shakespeare 1997c, act 1, scene 1, lines 91-93.

daughter as her sisters do. Her alienated subjectivity gets in the way of her ability to play the part that her father demands of her. Although the play concludes with the reconciliation of Lear with the one daughter that genuinely loves him, both Lear and Cordelia die just after this reconciliation. Lear's reluctance to accept the necessity of his alienation and that of the family dooms him to ending his life in ostracism. Through the negative example of Lear, the play shows the damage that the flight from alienation brings about. Cordelia's ethical being, in contrast, stems from her steadfast embrace of her alienated subjectivity.

Modern Insomnia

In relation to the three earlier tragedies, *Macbeth* appears to stand out. It is this latest that Shakespeare wrote, and it has no figure approximating the ethical stature of Hamlet or Cordelia. Macbeth himself is the least appealing of the tragic heroes that populate Shakespeare's four great tragedies. But even he reveals the foregrounding of alienation that arrives with modernity. The play begins with the three witches that announce the inversion of everything. They say together, "Fair is foul, foul is fair."[17] Although the introduction of witches suggest a premodern epoch, what they say bespeaks their modernity. The inversion that they announce in this chant is that of modernity, an epoch in which subjectivity transforms that with which it interacts into its opposite. They subsequently prophesize Macbeth's rise to the position of king. When Macbeth takes the prophecy of the witches into his own hands, he topples the ruling order and accedes to the throne. He introduces disorder into kingdom because he has an alien relationship to it. This disorder is not simply external to Macbeth but permeates his own subjectivity. His response to his own criminality reveals that he cannot coincide with himself. He is not reducible to this criminality.

Even before he commits them, Macbeth is unable to live with his criminal deeds. This is what makes him a modern tragic hero in the vein of Hamlet or Othello. Prior to killing Duncan and making himself king, Macbeth has to confront a "dagger of the mind" that threatens his gains in symbolic status.[18] After killing Duncan and then Banquo, Macbeth's relationship to the world becomes much more alien. His psyche cannot simply accept what he has done. Instead, he must confront the bloody deeds without respite. The killing of Duncan haunts him immediately in the wake of the act. He tells Lady Macbeth, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murther sleep.'"[19] In addition

17 Shakespeare 1997d, act 1, scene 1, line 11.

18 Shakespeare 1997d, act 2, scene 1, line 38.

19 Shakespeare 1997d, act 2, scene 2, lines 32-33.

to tormenting Macbeth internally, his psyche produces fantoms that undermine his authority when his subjects see him interacting with the empty air. These psychotic moments reveal a subject not at home in his world. This displacement is what gives Macbeth his tragic grandeur but also what ends up undoing him.

Even Macbeth's death occurs through a break from nature. An apparition comes to Macbeth and tells him that no one born from a woman will kill him. He feels confidence going into battle thanks to this prophecy. But he subsequently loses this confidence when he learns about his opponent—that "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd."[20] Macduff's unnatural birth allows him to be the vehicle for Macbeth's death. Shakespeare emphasizes the break from nature from the beginning of the play to the penultimate act. When Macduff brings Macbeth's head to the new King Malcolm at the end of the play, the latter proclaims that proper measure will prevail. But we can be sure that in the modern epoch this will remain an empty proclamation.

In each of the four great tragedies, the irreducibility of the subject to what conditions it becomes starkly evident. The subjects of these tragedies stick out from their situations. From Hamlet's questioning of the dead father to Macbeth's inability to eliminate Duncan and Banquo psychically, Shakespeare's heroes evince the subject's alienation. Even though Hamlet acts on this alienation with a display of radical doubt and Macbeth finds himself unable to get away with murder, in both cases the subject's distance from itself and from its society stands out. Shakespeare's four tragedies point in the direction of emancipation by highlighting the inescapability of alienation.

Alienated into Emancipation

The alienation that suffuses Shakespeare's tragic universe has no antecedent in ancient tragedies. While ancient tragedies can depict a revolt against the oppressiveness of the social order, they don't reveal subjectivity's failure to fit within this order because they don't reveal subjectivity's failure to be identical with itself. The most radical hero of ancient tragedy—a character such as Antigone—evinces a security in her position that undermines her radicality, despite her capacity for resisting the ruling order to the point of her own death. Antigone stands out in Greek drama, but she doesn't stand out from herself. This limits her ability to point the way to emancipation.[21]

20 Shakespeare 1997d, act 5, scene 8, lines 15-16.

21 Alenka Zupančič points out that Antigone emerges from the contradiction that divides the Greek social order from itself. What Antigone shows, according to Zupančič, is that "the subject is not simply an effect of the structure but the effect of its inherent contradiction or negativity—which is not the same thing" (Zupančič 2023, p. 61). What marks the limit of Antigone as a figure of

Even relative to a character as evil as Iago, Antigone remains removed from the possibility of emancipation. Sophocles presents Antigone as identical with what she says about herself, whereas Shakespeare emphasizes the distance between Iago and his representation of himself. Iago reveals an awareness of this distance, an awareness of his alienation, which highlights the space for emancipation. He runs through a series of clearly false explanations for his betrayal of Othello. His recourse to multiple explanations indicates the falsity of each one as it also shows his own awareness of his alienation. At no point does Shakespeare reveal that Iago coincides with himself. His self-division—the fact that he is never what he says he is—exposes the distance between Iago and his social position. Although he destroys himself along with Othello, Iago's alienation bespeaks an emancipation from authority that is foreign to Antigone. The spectator of *Othello* must confront the subject's alienation in a way that the spectator of *Antigone* need not.

The emergence of the modern tragic hero foregrounds the problem of alienation. This is the fundamental distinction between ancient and modern tragedy, a distinction that opens the path to emancipation in the modern universe. None of Shakespeare's heroes can locate themselves relative to any social imperatives. They constantly run up against their failure to fit in any social identity. Their tragedy derives from their inability to be themselves. They are tragic figures insofar as they challenge themselves, and this self-division emancipates them from any social authority. But this emancipation cannot evade the problem of doubt that appears so prominently in the case of Hamlet. Antigone appears as an appealing contrast today because she can devote herself to a cause without manifesting any alienation from this cause. It seems as if Antigone should be a paradigm for the project of emancipation. But this is a path down which we should not follow her. The inability of the modern tragic hero to recognize itself in its own acts is the path of its emancipation.

emancipation is that she cannot see herself in this inherent contradiction. Instead, she believes that she merely obeys the unwritten law of the gods—and Sophocles cannot demonstrate otherwise to the spectator.

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