JELA KREČIČ

Hamlet, Love, and Reasonable Doubt

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* remains one of the most intensely debated works in literary history. In this essay, I propose a reading centered on the theme of love, on the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. More precisely, I will explore how the play's pervasive atmosphere of doubt – triggered by the ghost's revelation and sustained by Hamlet's skepticism toward everyone and everything at the Danish court – shapes and destabilizes the lovers' bond. Put differently, I will analyze how the failure to attain knowledge or certainty affects the very being of those involved in a romantic relationship.

To examine this question, I draw on René Descartes's *Meditations* which elevate doubt to a form of sublime madness, and on Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Cartesian subjectivity. Finally, I extend the inquiry beyond Shakespeare's text to consider how Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) offers a metafictional resolution to Hamlet's existential dilemma and proposes a more emancipatory vision of love in relation to doubt.

Descartes *avec* Hamlet

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written roughly forty years before Descartes' *Meditations*, shares an important aspect with this philosophical treatise: they both conceive modern subjectivity through the lens of doubt.

To briefly summarize Descartes' procedure in the *Meditations*, he attempts to establish the certainty of the subject's knowledge. In the first meditation, he outlines several reasons for doubting the possibility of acquiring adequate knowledge: for example, our senses can deceive us, our perceptions are not always reliable, and we cannot always distinguish between dreams and reality. Yet some truths – such as mathematical ones – seem persistent and independent of our sensory apparatus. Even if my capacity for reasoning were somehow flawed by the grace of God, it seems unlikely that I would be wrong about these truths. That is why Descartes raises the stakes and proposes the existence of an omnipotent Deceiver: the most radical instance of doubt, since this malicious spirit is capable – or even predisposed – to deceive us about everything, including every perception and conception, along with basic mathematical truths.

In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's doubts arise after encountering the ghost of his father, who reveals that the current king, his brother Claudius, murdered him. The ghost simultaneously insists that Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, is innocent. Armed with this knowledge and a symbolic mandate to avenge his father, Hamlet nevertheless sinks into an acute state of doubt.

If we pause to reflect on the notion of an omnipotent Deceiver and consider Hamlet's predicament, we see that after hearing the ghost, he regards everyone as a potential deceiver. First and foremost, the Deceiver is incarnated in his uncle Claudius, the murderer who has attained both the crown and a new wife through an act of regicide, that is, through the ultimate deception. But as Claudius is now king, suspicion extends to the entire court, including Hamlet's mother (who may not be involved in the murder but is blinded by her infatuation with her new husband), Polonius, and, by association, Ophelia. Yet even the father's ghost cannot be entirely trusted and functions as a Cartesian omnipotent Deceiver. Hamlet himself acknowledges this when he stages the play-within-a-play in the so-called "Mouse-trap" scene. The father's ghost could, in fact, be the devil. In Hamlet's words:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be the devil: and the devil hath power
> To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and, perhaps,
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds
> More relative than this – the play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (2.2.633–640).[1]

Since the ghost may have deceived him, Hamlet resolves to test his suspicions regarding the murderous Claudius by means of a theatrical performance that dramatizes precisely the theme of royal fratricide.

After the ghost's testimony shatters his world, Hamlet mirrors the Cartesian tortured subject, doubting everything and everyone. Unlike *Meditations* (where Descartes provides a proof of a truthful and benevolent God), however, Hamlet lacks the higher authority that would guarantee the validity of his knowledge – he can find no reassurance from the ghost, Claudius, Gertrude, or God. *Hamlet* thus can be read, in part, as a drama of seeking a trustworthy authority. This quest also has a political dimension: the corruption in the Danish government indicates a need for a more just ruler, ultimately represented by the Norwegian prince Fortinbras, as the Danish kings are proven corrupt and all die by the play's end.

If we can identify significant similarities between Descartes' subject and Hamlet, it is equally crucial to emphasize the differences between them. Hamlet's pursuit of certainty operates in a manner quite opposed to Descartes' method: he does not rely on philosophical deduction but on fiction – the play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap*. He stages this performance in order to observe Claudius' reaction. Here fiction becomes the vehicle for truth – a notion that resonates with Lacan's readings of *Hamlet*.[2] There is no immediate or direct path to truth; rather,

---

1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. All excerpts and references to *Hamlet* are rendered in "act, scene, line" form, with reference to the 2019 Cambridge University Press Edition.

2 See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VI: Le désir et son interpretation*.

truth can only be apprehended through a carefully constructed imaginary framing.[3]

Appearance and deception are of crucial importance in *Hamlet*, although the protagonist's stance toward them is highly contradictory. He is critical of Polonius and Claudius who cunningly attempt to gain certainty regarding Hamlet's mental state. Polonius instructs his daughter, Ophelia, to extract from Hamlet evidence that he has lost his reason due to unrequited love. Yet Hamlet himself pursues certainty by feigning madness – a ruse intended to facilitate his investigation and the acquisition of knowledge. He despises pretense in others while simultaneously adopting the same method to advance his own agenda.

The protagonist frequently voices his aversion to the realm of appearances. When his mother asks why he seems so unreconcilable with the fact that people – including his father – must die, Hamlet replies: "Seems, madam? nay it is; I know not 'seems'" (1.2.72–76). He further reproaches Ophelia for wearing makeup, thereby presenting a face other than the one God has given her. While Hamlet places his wager on the power of theatrical pretense, he nonetheless maintains faith in a truth that lies beyond deceptive appearances.

Returning to the question of the omnipotent Deceiver or the *evil spirit* in the drama, Hamlet himself may be considered as such a figure, particularly in relation to the two female protagonists. On the one hand, he cannot reconcile himself to the fact that his mother did not mourn his father long enough; he also reproaches her for the sexual pleasures she shares with Claudius.[4] On the other hand, he is merciless towards Ophelia. It is apparent that, before the events of the play, they had been romantically involved. This is suggested indirectly, among other things through the letters he once sent her, assuring her of his devotion. The lines from Hamlet's letter to Ophelia are delivered by Polonius as he tries to convince Gertrude that unrequited love has triggered Hamlet's madness:

3 See also Alenka Zupančič, "A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock's Films."

4 One might note that Lacan's reading of Hamlet somewhat subverts the established psychoanalytic reading that finds in Hamlet a classical Oedipus desire for the mother. For Lacan, on the contrary, the crucial question for Hamlet is, what is his mother's desire, what does the other want? See Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VI*.

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love (2.2.115–118).

It seems there was a time when Hamlet protested his love to Ophelia in terms of absolute certainty: if she can doubt natural laws (the movements of the planets), even every truth, she cannot doubt his love. Now, however, he undermines every certainty regarding their relationship. First, he denies ever giving her mementos accompanied by love letters, then he accuses her of relinquishing her virtues, adding, "I did love you once." Then he goes on to explain: "You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not" (3.1.115–118).

Like an evil demon, then, he insults her but also robs her of any certainty in his love and, at the very least, contributes to her ruin, if not directly causing it. It is precisely this deadly aspect of love to which I would now like to turn our attention – namely, I want to examine how doubt in love touches upon the very core of the subject's being.

Descartes' Doubts

We must therefore return to Descartes and his hypothesis of the omnipotent Deceiver. This spirit, as we recall, renders all my knowledge questionable, leaving me with no certainty about anything. From this premise, Descartes derives his famous *cogito*. The insight underlying it is that even if the evil spirit deceives me about every item of knowledge, I nonetheless exist as the one who has been deceived, as the one who has been seduced. If I have thought, if I have doubted, if I have persuaded myself of anything at all, then I have indeed existed – even if the validity of my knowledge remains in question. By the method of doubt, we thus arrive at the first point of certainty: the existence of the subject.

In the next step, Descartes seeks to secure a certain guarantee for the subject's knowledge as well. The certainty of being is not the same as

the certainty of knowing. Only by proving the existence of a benevolent, non-deceptive God – the Other – does Descartes establish an instance that guarantees also the validity of the subject's knowledge.

The fundamental objection to Descartes – one taken up to a certain extent by Lacan in *Seminar XI* – is that *cogito* and *sum* (thinking and being) are not commensurate entities. To put it succinctly: the subject cannot choose herself as being. In the forced choice between thought and being, we are always compelled to choose the *cogito* (thought and meaning) at the expense of being. We are always already drawn into the symbolic order of the Other, which becomes the guarantor of our being. I must first exist within the symbolic – within the order of the signifier, meaning, and sense – in order to have any certainty about my own existence. In the words of Alenka Zupančič:

> I can choose only meaning (the existence of the Other as the locus of signifiers), but with this choice I lose the immediate certainty of my being: my being is now mediated by the Other; the Other is the locus, the symbolic structure that precedes me and determines that and what I am.[5]

Certainty of being is thus mediated through the symbolic. Yet this forced choice of alienation comes with a remainder of doubt, which affects both the side of the subject of the *cogito* and that of the Other. Lacan's reading suggests that the subject's choice of the Other as the field of signifiers and meaning subsequently entails *separation*. The Other is not a perfect, complete structure; it cannot be fully reduced to sense or meaning. The signifying structure is itself marked by lack – the Other contains gaps or intervals (meaning, as it is generated, remains open, ambiguous) – and for this reason the Other functions as an enigma. Let us recall a well-known Lacanian quotation:

> A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of

5 Alenka Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 58.

> the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically mappable, namely, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want? /* In this interval intersecting the signifiers, which forms part of the very structure of the signifier, is the locus of what, in other registers of my exposition, I have called metonymy. It is there that what we call desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret. The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child's whys reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a *Why are you telling me this?* ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire.[6]

The inconsistency, the incompleteness of the symbolic, poses the question "What does the Other want?", to which the subject responds with another question: "Do I have what the Other wants?" The subject is placed in the position of having to offer not only what she has, but above all what she does not have, which is precisely Lacan's definition of love: *donner ce qu'on n'a pas*, to give what one does not have. What the subject does not have is her very being.[7]

Separation thus illuminates the relation between the subject and the Other from a different perspective: both are marked by a lack, which is the result of their emergence through the forced choice between thinking and being. For the Other, this lack concerns the gap between signifiers – ambiguity or enigma, pertaining to the signifiers' logic; for the subject of the *cogito*, it is the loss of being incurred in choosing the signifier. The remainder of being that the subject is compelled to sacrifice in order to live within the symbolic, within the signifier, leaves a trace as non-being, which Lacan calls the *objet a*. This paradoxical object clings to the subject of the *cogito*, subordinated to the signifier. This non-being (a void in the place of being) is also, in this interpretation, the only thing the subject can offer in response to the enigma of the Other or the Other's desire.

---

6 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 214.

7 I owe this argument to Mladen Dolar. See Mladen Dolar, "Cogito," 80.

The fact that Lacan illustrates the constitution of subjectivity through the forced choice by introducing the notion of love as the split subject's response to the ambiguous Other may point to a deeper connection between love and the constitution of subjectivity, as well as the possibility of knowledge. In love, the offered non-being (the paradoxical *objet a*) concerns a pair, that is, two split subjects who, in relation to one another, also play the role of the Other. The question, however, is what the two of them will do with the attributed enigmatic quality and this unusual gift of love in the form of the *objet a*. Their union finds no support in the symbolic; it exists as a fidelity to an event whose meaning, at the moment of its occurrence, is unclear – if indeed it has any meaning at all. And if, for both subjects, it means at least that it *means something*, and if the indeterminate meaning of what they form together must be given a certain form of the life of the couple, then this opens the possibility for the creation of love as described by Alain Badiou in his *In Praise of Love* – a love that can also be understood as the possibility of a re-creation of both subjectivities.[8] The scene of the Two, which the couple must construct, is also a defense against the ambiguity of the symbolic itself. Yet this reading might perhaps be better grounded in Lacan's radically different understanding of the *cogito* from his *The Logic of Fantasy*.[9]

In this alternative reading, the *cogito* finds itself on the side of the unconscious, in the field of non-being. In the forced choice between *cogito* and *sum*, the subject can now choose only being. The reasons for doubt culminate in the subject quite literally un-thinking all thoughts until nothing remains but the certainty of being (*I am*). The unconscious consists, more precisely, of those thoughts – that store of symbolic formations (dreams, slips) – which, as Alenka Zupančič succinctly notes, cannot count on the subject's recognition; from them no "I am" follows. On the contrary, their effect can only be: "This is not me."

"The thinking that is cut off and goes to the waste bin is precisely the unconscious."[10] According to this interpretation, the *cogito* is the site of

8 See Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*.

9 See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XIV: La logique du fantasme*.

10 Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 63.

non-being. "However – and this is Lacan's key addition – this thing that is not there, this 'cut-off' part, does not disappear without leaving a trace, a gap: and this gap is the unconscious properly speaking; the consistency of the unconscious is that of the gap."[11] It is a non-being that exists, that ex-sists.

This means that being, the choice of being (without thinking) is struck by the gap of non-being. "What is conveyed by a slip of the tongue or a dream is not some deeper or more reliable truth, but rather, the certainty that thinking goes on even though I am not there as the subject of thinking – that is, even if I am not there where I think, or I think where I am not."[12] This constellation of split subjectivity is well illustrated by anxiety, that dreadful certainty of non-being, as Zupančič terms it: "The certainty at stake here, however, is not the certainty of being, but rather the certainty of thinking that goes on out there where I am not, and in this sense, the certainty of non-being." Furthermore, "One might say that anxiety is … the closest we can get to experience of the lack-of-being without repression or concealment."[13]

According to this reading, love could be defined as the event that activates precisely the field of unconscious thought, in which we cannot recognize ourselves. Or love introduces a complete uncertainty of the meaning and sense of the big Other, which is at least temporarily suspended in favor of the unconscious thought. Love is an event that the subject cannot consciously choose (cannot anticipate, plan, or rationally decide upon). On the contrary, we might say, love chooses the subject. Only afterwards can the subject acknowledge that she loves this particular other. Love chooses the subject, suspending her being (in the symbolic, in the signifier). Or more precisely, non-thinking, the lack of knowledge, is what decides instead of the subject, and with it comes the dreadful certainty of non-being – that is, radical uncertainty about who I am, what I am, if I am?

The event of love results in an uncertainty of being (an inauguration of existential anxiety), and the crucial question is what the couple in love

11 Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 63.

12 Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 65.

13 Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 66.

can do with this anxiety. Here we return to Badiou's figure of love as creation, which, following the Lacanian reading, is driven precisely by the suspension of subjectivity (being). The pair is given the opportunity to create their world, which in turn creates (or at least alters) the subjects' "I am," their being. Only belatedly does the couple, as this new creation, position itself within the symbolic order. The subject gains a certainty about her own being from the loving other, not from the symbolic – indeed, the certainty or rather meaningfulness of the symbolic is established as a consequence of the certainty of love.

In other words, according to this Cartesian-Lacanian reading of love, the original loss – the existential uncertainty of the subject at the event of love (the transformation into a subject of love, one might say) – can be soothed, stabilized, or domesticated through the concrete creation of the couple's shared life, which also restructures their symbolic order. In this context, the loving couple retroactively establishes the meaning or even justification of the symbolic, rather than the other way around.

Based on this frail and precarious constellation of love, it becomes obvious that love can be the scene in which the subject encounters the enigma of the Other in a more intense or even dangerous form, where there is always room for doubt (about love, about the loving other, and the loving subject herself). If we risk yet another Lacanian reading, marriage can be seen as the retrospective symbolization of the event of love, through which the couple suspends reasons for doubt about each other. In practice, reasons for doubt in the Other or in the shared love can of course always arise at any time and sometimes have a disruptive impact on the fate of the married couple, but at least in principle and for some period of time, marriage is a tool through which the subjects assure each other and the Other that their bond is undeceitful, to use Descartes' term.[14] The big Other authorizes the couple's symbolic world and grants it a guarantee (Badiou might call this a guarantee of persistence), but it is up to the couple what they will do with this declared certainty. More precisely, a

14 It goes without saying that this is a very modern conception of marriage as an institution based on free will or free emotions, so to speak, of the two parties, and not on the parental, religious, or social constraints.

wedding ritual testifies that at least at one moment this love aspired to be eternal, and the truth of this commitment will be established in retrospect by the concrete practices of the couple's life (or love).

That love triggers a reconfiguration of the symbolic for the lovers is especially evident in cases of loss – whether through separation or death. The effect of this loss is often accompanied by the phrase "My world has collapsed,' indicating that with the loss of a beloved person one has lost the shared universe, and with it, the symbolic universe as the means of meaning and sense. And at this junction, we can return to Ophelia.

Ophelia's Story

As we have indicated, Ophelia is exploited by drama's various characters. Everyone uses and manipulates her to gain better knowledge of one another. However, the key factors in her descent into madness are Hamlet's sowing of doubt and the brutal death of her father – also caused by her beloved Hamlet – which serves as the final push over the edge into madness.

The songs she sings and recites in her delirium are symptomatic; they blend the motif of grief over her father's death with mourning Hamlet, who has betrayed her love. She sings several songs, among which we find lamentations for Polonius:

> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone,
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone (4.5.38–41).

Her next lamentation seems to be of another nature:

> Larded all with sweet flowers,
> Which bewept to the ground did not go
> With true-love showers (4.5.43–45).

When trying to explain to the bewildered Gertrude and Claudius the meaning of her singing, she goes on:

> Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
> All in the morning betime,
> And I a maid at your window,
> To be your Valentine.
> Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,
> And dupped the chamber door,
> Let in the maid, that out a maid
> Never departed more (4.5.48–55).

Obviously, we cannot take her words, indicating a consummated relationship with Hamlet, at face value, but they at least confirm what her unconscious thinking – to use our Cartesian-Lacanian terminology – is struggling with.

It is not our aim to provide an in-depth psychoanalytic reading of what we could call a slip into psychosis, but two elements seem to stand out. Firstly, as said, we may conjecture that her delirium was triggered by Hamlet's attitude towards her and her father's death. Secondly, her delirious songs are, as Lacan would put it, already attempts at healing her trauma; they aim at rescuing her shattered world. The withdrawal of Hamlet's love during his apparent madness activated her unconscious thoughts, leaving her being in an entirely precarious condition. One might say that her suicide completes her surrender to non-being – a deed Hamlet himself is unable to commit, though he fantasizes about it constantly, and the most famous soliloquy in the play, "To be or not to be," debates exactly this question.

To sum up, one might risk the thesis that her slip into non-being results from Hamlet's persistent sowing of doubt about his affections toward her. We could say that Ophelia is collateral damage in the main hero's quest for knowledge, revenge, and moral or political restoration. Yet one might also speculate that the ease with which Hamlet sacrifices her for these seemingly noble causes could be the true trigger of her madness.

Hamlet's role in the destruction of Ophelia perhaps needed the 20th and 21st centuries – with the rise of feminism – to be recognized as such. Today, we would designate his behavior toward Ophelia as *toxic*, and his attempts to bewilder her as *gaslighting*.

The term *gaslighting* was coined with reference to the classic melodrama *Gaslight* (1944), which introduces a male character as an omnipotent deceiver. The movie portrays Gregory as an extremely malicious spirit who attempts to drive his wife Paula insane by questioning her mental faculties and reasoning. Gregory dismisses her perceptions – her visions, the dimming gaslights, and the sounds of footsteps in the attic – in order to convince her she is losing her mind.

Paula's husband forces her into the position of a Cartesian subject, thrown into uncertainty about her every perception. Yet the feeling that she is losing her mind is not the primary source of her uncertainty and anxiety; rather, it is Gregory's cold, contemptuous, and cruel attitude toward her supposed madness.

At one point, a benevolent spirit intervenes: the detective Brian, who assures Paula she is not mad, and that her husband was deliberately driving her insane. Yet neither Brian nor his explanation can calm her; indeed, when he reveals her husband's criminal past, Paula's world truly collapses. The paradox is that Paula can ultimately trust her perceptions and knowledge while being plunged into total uncertainty about her own being. The treatment she suffered from her husband ultimately drives her – not out of her mind, but *out of her being*. In other words, Paula could write perfectly reasonable philosophical treatises (on the question of *cogito* and *sum*, for example) while remaining uncertain of her own being.

There are many differences between Hamlet and Gregory – the most important one being that Hamlet's deeds are not primarily aimed at Ophelia. She is not his main target but rather his collateral damage. Also, Hamlet is, at least in the eyes of the other characters, himself mad, which should to some extent justify his cold demeanor toward Ophelia, although his apparent illness does not fully explain the change of heart in his love or why this change takes such a malicious and contemptuous turn.

There has never been much attention paid to Hamlet's role as a malicious spirit – an omnipotent deceiver, especially toward Ophelia, although his disdain for all female characters is highly pathological. Despite the loss he has suffered, there is no real justification for the way he abuses his mother or undermines not only women's reasoning but, more fundamentally, their very being.

As we see, there is a distinction between the role the symbolic universe and love play in the constitution of being: if the symbolic order collapses for any reason (as Hamlet's does with the appearance and revelation of his father's ghost), this is not as fatal for the subject's being as is the transformation of the beloved Other into a malicious spirit. One might risk the thesis that the birth of modern subjectivity that *Hamlet* introduces is symptomatically connected with the abuse or exclusion of women as less important subjects and less important beings.

I am not suggesting that Shakespeare or the play endorses Hamlet's actions, but it nonetheless reflects its time and ideology by excluding women and their subjectivity from the spotlight. They are merely tools used for the main hero's agenda.

Consequently, love in this drama turns deadly only for Ophelia, but it neither damages nor affects Hamlet's being. She is the one whose world is shattered by the loss of love, so much so that she literally ends up in non-being. Hamlet is indeed affected when, upon returning from England, he learns of Ophelia's death; at that moment, he jumps into her grave and swears:

> I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
> Could not, with all their love, make up my sum (5.1.254–255).

However, none of this truly jeopardizes the certainty of his being. On the contrary. As Ophelia becomes the object of the hero's desire after her death, she helps restore his subjectivity and enables him to finally carry out his murderous project – as Lacan's interpretation would suggest. How else can we understand the dying Hamlet's request to Horatio at the end of the play to tell his story? It is the request of a subject who – no matter how

much Hamlet despises his own existence – still sees himself as worthy of a story.

The fact that Ophelia becomes important for Hamlet only after her death is again very telling. One can seriously doubt whether this love – which arises only after the beloved has perished – is true and honest, at least if we measure it by Badiou's concept of love. His idea of love as the creation of *two* is not an abstract ideal but something that demands concrete involvement with the other in everyday life. Only then can love live up to its concept.

That is Not the Question

With *Hamlet*, we get a very dubious vision of love, a love that is in the last instance shattered by doubt. In the history of art, there is a great amount of literature and films that delve into this theme and the message we get from most of them is similar to *Hamlet*'s – doubt can cause devastating consequences for all parties involved.[15] So the question is, are there any examples of alternative dealing with the always mysterious or even dangerous dimension of the beloved Other? Hollywood's comedy of remarriage is certainly a genre that highlights very concrete and pertinent reasons for doubting love, but nonetheless finds various strategies to resolve them.[16] However, I will focus on a film, Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *To Be or Not to Be*, which is not strictly a comedy of remarriage, but nonetheless focuses on a married couple and their love, tormented by doubt. Incidentally *Hamlet* plays the crucial role in their love games.

The film's plot is centered around the ensemble of the Polish National theater that joins the resistance against the Nazi occupiers. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (specifically its famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy) frames the story around the time before the German occupation and after a successful operation and escape of a group of Polish actors to England. I won't go

15 Think only of another of Shakespeare's characters, Othello.

16 I can only point to Cavell's famous book in this fascinating genre. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*.

into the details of how this theatrical group outwits the Gestapo, but will focus on the meta-fictional use of *Hamlet*, which in this film revolves precisely around a love couple.

The role of Hamlet is played by the famous Polish actor Joseph Tura (Jack Benny), and his wife Maria Tura, also a leading star of the Polish theater (Carole Lombard), plays Ophelia (at least according to my interpretation). Their relationship is strongly strained by suspicion. But comedy – especially Lubitsch's – can point to a comedic yet philosophically interesting way out of lingering uncertainty.

Joseph doubts his own acting greatness, but even more so Maria's fidelity. Soon we learn that his suspicions are not unfounded, yet Lubitsch sides with Lacan, who sees every jealousy, even if justified, as pathological. Why? Let's wager a thesis that jealousy is the way a jealous individual protects their own being and tries to keep it undeceived. Descartes' reasons for doubt are not of the same order as the jealous person's reasons for doubting their loved one. Descartes tries to ensure the integrity of the subject's knowledge, whereas the jealous person tries to secure the integrity of their being, seeing the other as someone who always potentially threatens it. In other words, the ideal partner for the jealous person would be someone who only endlessly reassured them. So, in jealousy it is difficult to speak of love as a creation; indeed, it is hard to speak of love at all.

How do Maria Tura, and her dramatic persona Ophelia, respond to the husband's suspicion and insecurity? By simultaneously sabotaging both the hero Hamlet and the husband. When Hamlet/Joseph Tura begins the monologue, "To be or not to be," a man in the audience leaves the theatre hall, which throws Joseph Tura – and Hamlet – off track. The film audience quickly learns that the man who walked out on Hamlet's most famous monologue was a fan of Maria Tura, whom she had invited to her dressing room for a brief romantic rendezvous at the safest time when her husband was performing a key scene in the famous play.

This scene is nicely interpreted by Mladen Dolar. He sees walking away as the only correct answer to Hamlet's notorious dilemma. When faced with this question, charged with all the existential weight, one simply has to walk away, not get caught by the forced choice it imposes. In Dolar's

words: "To be or not to be? Sorry, I have to see my mistress. Comedy consists of answers, not of questions: the comedy of unexpected answers popping up in unlikely places, coming from another quarter than the direction aimed at by the question."[17] And further: "If posing the question in these terms already implied the necessary answer 'not to be,' … then the only way to choose 'to be' is to choose an out-of-place being with no place in this alternative, neither to be nor not to be."[18] One could say that love demands precisely such an out-of-place being – or, better yet, a being that allows itself to be displaced; hence I might dare to propose that the structure of love is essentially the structure of comedy.

In Lubitsch's film, this is underscored by a key feminist undertone. Maria Tura as Ophelia does not accept the framework set by Hamlet as a persona and Tura as a husband. To the question "To be or not to be?", posed by two problematic male figures – Hamlet and the conceited actor Joseph Tura – the heroine Ophelia, through the actress Maria Tura, offers a truly feminist response: she simply ignores the hero's and husband's being. To these doubts, she responds by adding new reasons to doubt. In the film, Joseph's jealousy and self-doubt mirror a Cartesian quest for assurance in love – a desire to vindicate his being through the other's fidelity. But Maria, through playful sabotage, disrupts this dynamic. She refuses to be confined by Hamlet's role or by her jealous husband. Her actions – ignoring his authority, the authority of Hamlet, and offering other reasons for doubt – become a feminist stand: not rejecting love but refusing to play by its oppressive rules. Her love does not seek to secure Joseph's self-indulgence; rather, she opens space for mutual creation – an act of love as comedic displacement, not possessive anchoring.

It is important to note that Joseph's search for certainty in the relationship and Maria's accumulation of reasons for doubt function as a love game or perhaps even foreplay for both characters. It becomes clear that this dynamic is their personal theater, a mode through which they practice love. When the reality of war takes over their lives and the lives of the

17 Mladen Dolar, "To Be Or Not To Be? No, Thank You," in: *Lubitsch Can't Wait*, 123.
18 Dolar, "To Be Or Not To Be?", 123.

Poles, they temporarily suspend all games, all doubts, and teasing. In tense situations, they are just a boring couple devoted to each other.

When things normalize and they successfully flee to England with the ensemble, they, however, return to their usual love-jealousy routine. The film's ending reinforces the feminist undertone – Joseph gets the chance to play Hamlet again in England. And when he begins the famous monologue, the familiar scene repeats: a spectator walks out of the hall, surprising not only Hamlet/Joseph but also Maria's former Polish lover.

In this, I see a happy ending of Joseph and Maria's love story, where love is generated through feigned promiscuity and staged jealousy. But we can also recognize a happy ending for Ophelia on the metafictional level. Through Maria Tura she gains the opportunity to free herself from Hamlet's exhausting being and his malicious gaslighting. If we doubt in order to protect our being, we at the same time destroy the possibility of a couple, of love. A being in love is out of joint, we might paraphrase the famous line from *Hamlet*, but precisely as such this being opens the possibility for the creation of the scene of Two. If love is to have any emancipatory dimension, it can only be a comedy.

Bibliography

Badiou, Alain. *In Praise of Love*. Trans. Peter Bush. New York: The New Press, 2012.

Stanley Cavell. *Pursuits of Happines: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. Michael Moriarty. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Dolar, Mladen. "Cogito kot subjekt nezavednega." *Problemi* 35, 5-6 (1997): 65–93.

———. "To Be Or Not To Be? No, Thank You." In: *Lubitsch Can't Wait*, 111–31. Eds. Ivana Novak and Jela Krečič. Ljubljana: Slovenian Cinematheque, 2014.

Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1998.

———. *Le Séminaire, livre VI: Le désir et son interpretation*. Paris: Martiniere BL, 2013.

———. *Le Séminaire, livre XIV: La logique du fantasme*. Paris: Seuil, 2023.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Ed. Brian Gibbons. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Zupančič, Alenka. "A perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock's Films." In: *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, 73–106. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 1992.

———. *Disawoval*. Cambridge: Polity, 2024.