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Danica Igrutinović*
University Singidunum
Faculty for Media and Communications
Belgrade, Serbia

NOTHING OF WOMAN: THE FEMININE VOID OF MATTER IN SHAKESPEARE

Abstract
Studying the metaphysics of Renaissance Neoplatonism might arguably help throw into sharper relief some of the more haunting figures in Shakespeare's work. Referring to the Neoplatonic concept of matter, this paper attempts to expand and further illuminate the figure that Philippa Berry has termed "Shakespeare's tragic O's" (2002) by showing it to connect multiple images of matter as the maternal/infernal void. In Shakespeare's darker plays, the "O" as feminine prime matter can figure as a locus for the encounter with primordial matter, the womb/tomb that (en)matters and thus kills, "hell" and "nothing" that can indicate both unformed matter and the vaginal orifice, and the nothing – the 0 – out of which everything is made.

Key words: Renaissance Neoplatonism, matter, the maternal, nothing, O

* E-mail address: danica.igrutinovic@fmk.edu.rs

1. Matter in Renaissance Neoplatonism

By the sixteenth century, under the widespread influence of Marsilio Ficino's writings and his Florentine Academy, modeled on Plato's, Platonism had become an extremely important aspect of popular culture and had an "almost ubiquitous presence" throughout Europe. (Kristeller 1961: 61) This, significantly, included England – especially its poets. Many of Ficino's theories, Jayne declares, "were in the intellectual atmosphere and could have reached England in a number of indirect ways," but there are also those English poets who were demonstrably directly impacted by Ficino's writings. There are, for instance, in Spenser's verses "verbatim quotations and sequences of ideas unquestionably taken directly from Ficino," (Jayne 1952: 217) and other poets who can be shown to have actually read Ficino include Raleigh, Burton, and Chapman (Jayne 1952: 238). Other poets and thinkers had received Ficino's ideas via other sources, mostly poetic, resulting in a profusion of thought closely reflecting his own, and justifying his reputation as the "fountainhead" of Platonism in the English Renaissance (Jayne 1952: 222).

We have in the past two decades, owing to the recently appearing translations of Ficino's works into English, witnessed a revival of interest in the phenomenon known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. Although not unknown to Shakespearologists, Renaissance Neoplatonism has long been neglected in interpretations of Shakespeare's works – especially the "darker" ones – as an overly marginal, eccentric, or optimistic concoction of notions on the harmony of the spheres. A deeper reading of Ficino's texts, as well as those of other Renaissance Neoplatonists and their ancient sources, offers an invaluable insight into the "dark" sides of both Neoplatonism and Shakespeare's "darker" plays.

Studying the inherently poetic and frequently paradoxical metaphysics of (Renaissance) Neoplatonism helps put into relief some of the more haunting figures in Shakespeare's work. A consistently gendered and hierarchized spirit/matter dichotomy is firmly at the basis of this metaphysics: spirit is forming, rational, light, and constructed as masculine, whereas matter is chaotic, irrational, dark, and constructed as feminine. The cosmos is a hierarchical combination of the two: at its top is the pure spirit of God, followed by a series of lower spheres, each reflecting, albeit imperfectly, the harmony of the one immediately above it, and each increasingly material (Lauster 2002: 48). The bottommost

rung on this ladder is the hell of primordial matter. That hell is no more – or less – than being, banished into the realm of the unformed elements, was a common tenet of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and advocated most famously by Paracelsus (Murray 1968: 284).

This infernal feminine matter is the unavoidable basis of all being that is, paradoxically, best avoided. In his highly influential *De Amore*, in which his ideas on love and beauty that in fact passed for "Platonism" in English Renaissance poetry are promulgated (Jayne 1952: 238), Ficino urges the (invariably) male subject to become purified via an erotic desire for beautiful (almost invariably) male figures (though personifying heavenly Venus, liberating spirit from the shackles of matter) which inspire Platonic ascent towards the pristine purity of spirit that is reflected in their beauty. In the proliferation of *trattati d'amore* that followed in the wake of Ficino's (a phenomenon which has since become known as "Renaissance love theory") these figures could also be female – provided they be chaste to the point of cruelty (Hanegraaff 2008: 175). Conversely, Ficino laments, *carnal* female figures (personifications of his vulgar Venus, trapping sparks of spirit in mortal bodies) will drag the lustful lover on a descent towards the more material spheres and, finally, tragically, right into the abyss that is unformed prime matter (Kodera 2002: 289).

Masculine spirit can thus descend to the very bottom of feminine prime matter and find in it nothing other than hell. The mythical figure that best personifies the hell of feminine prime matter would have to be Hecate. Queen of the daimons and first among the witches, personifying all the powers of lower nature, Hecate is, interestingly enough, in Neoplatonic thought firmly *identified* with matter itself. Shaw explicitly elucidates that, for Neoplatonists, Hecate does not merely *preside* over matter or have a symbolic *association* with matter – she *is* matter (Shaw 1995: 41).

The infernal feminine of Neoplatonism thus not only leads to and governs this dark realm, she is identified with it. Unlike the female anagogic figures that merely mirror or reflect the pristine purity of the (male) spirit they lead their (male) adorers towards, the seductress who causes the male hero to fall is also the *place* to which he falls. She is the thing itself, and the thing itself will transpire to be a nothing – a void. This void, as I hope to show, is represented in Shakespeare's work with circular, O-shaped figures, which is significant in multiple ways, and seems to be inextricably associated with female reproductive orifices – as is Neoplatonic matter itself.

2. O: facing the "oomb"

Several critics have noticed the significance of what Berry, perhaps most illuminatingly, terms "Shakespeare's tragic O's." Shakespeare's O's, she notes, frequently appearing in conjunction with his lethal and whorish queens/queans, elide these infernal female figures with "bodily openings or dilations that are similarly amoral," connecting the "gynaphobic" with the "reginaphobic" strand in his tragedies (Berry 2002: 50). This figure can, I hope, be expanded and further illuminated by referring to the Neoplatonic concept of matter.

The O which heroes, defeated by the infernal feminine figures, die with on their lips is simultaneously the O of the vaginal orifice, but it is also the womb/tomb – Joyce's brilliantly coined "oomb" – of Mother Earth, the O of dark feminine prime matter to which every Neoplatonic descent ultimately leads. More than just a vowel uttered by the gynaphobic male hero, this O also presents itself visually on Shakespeare's stage as the locus for an encounter with the hell of unformed matter.

The first – and also the most elaborate and explicit – appearance of an actual O on Shakespeare's stage is Tamora's infernal pit, with which the dark queen of Rome is identified in multiple ways. She is the first to mention it, and does a fair job of describing both its surroundings and the hole itself:

> A barren detested vale you see it is,
> The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,
> Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe;
> Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds,
> Unless the nighty owl or fatal raven;
> And when they show'd me this abhorred pit,
> They told me, here, at dead time of the night,
> A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
> Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
> Would make such fearful and confused cries,
> As any mortal body hearing it
> Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly.
> (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 93-104)

The pit is a fascinating amalgam of the monstrously sterile (barren vale) and the monstrously fertile (hissing snakes and swelling toads) and thus clearly represents matter itself, which is in Neoplatonic thought paradoxically both disgustingly fecund – teeming and oozing with misshapen potentialities – and unable to create actual life without the truly vital spirit. The delicious ambiguity of "here nothing breeds" must be especially emphasized, as it can denote both the utter sterility and the uber-fertility of the nothingness of malformed dark prime matter, untouched by the forming, life-infusing sun.

Attributes are added to the image of the pit when Martius falls into it, and Quintus eloquently muses on it before attempting to aid his brother:

> What, art thou fallen? What subtile hole is this,
> Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,
> Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood
> As fresh as morning dew distill'd on flowers?
> A very fatal place it seems to me.
> (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 198-202)

Gordon Williams classifies the circular hole of Tamora's pit under "O" in his *Glossary of Shakespeare's sexual language* and explains both as meaning "vagina," elucidating that "briars" were a common appellation for pubic hair (Williams 1997). O as the vagina is also "the swallowing womb" of "this deep pit, poor Bassianus' grave" (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 239-240). The womb is, of course, simultaneously the tomb.

This tomb is also a mouth that devours all: the "detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 224) and "this fell devouring receptacle" which is as "hateful as [Cocytus'] misty mouth" (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 235-236). Hades represented as a "hell-mouth," equipped to emit smoke, it should be noted here, was a standard stage-property of Renaissance theater. The devouring "receptacle" – a word reminiscent of Plato's term for the matrix of the world – is also hell, another term for the vagina; and thus the circle of O closes.

Kahn explains that Tamora's explicit "self-association with hell is more than conventional, given the imagery of the pit that connects hell not only with female sexuality (a connection ubiquitous in the Shakespearean canon as well) but more specifically […] with the malign fecundity of the maternal womb" (Kahn 2002: 69).

The O of the vagina, womb, and tomb is finally, Berry notes, "the O of Tamora's gaping mouth, when she devours her own children" (Berry 2002: 139).

Romeo's own descent into the O of Juliet's grave shows a similar over-elaborate elision of the gaping devouring mouth with the womb and the tomb of earth:

> Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,
> Gorg'd with the dearest morsel of the earth,
> Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,
> And in despite I'll cram thee with more food.
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, V. iii. 45-48)

In *Macbeth*, the witches significantly prepare their "hell-broth" in an O-shaped cauldron, and its ingredients should make it clear that we have now descended to the very bottom of the universe. Being bits and body parts of mostly formless, slimy animals like toads, lizards, and snakes, they plainly indicate primordial matter – chaotic, disordered, and disgusting. An especially intriguing addition to the mix is a "Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-deliver'd by a drab" (*Macbeth*, IV. i. 30-31). This links women as whores and mothers with witches as women constantly suspended between the two, proliferating nothing but dead misshapen matter. Hecate is understandably pleased.

Othello descends in his mind into the O he believes Desdemona to be: a "subtile whore" and a "closet lock and key of villainous secrets" (*Othello*, IV. ii. 21-22). A woman's closet, as her most intimate chamber where she is likely to entertain lovers, (Jardine 2005: 148) is linked in imagery with every facet of what Shakespeare's O represents, an association reinforced in Othello's accusation aimed at Emilia of having "the office opposite to Saint Peter" and keeping "the gate of hell" (*Othello*, IV. ii. 91-92). Presumably, as she has allowed lovers into Desdemona's closet – and thus into her vagina as well – Emilia is cast in the role of the hell porter.

Lear similarly descends in his mind into this vaginal hell or feminine prime matter:

> But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
> Beneath is all the fiends': there's hell, there's darkness,
> There is the suphurous pit, burning, scalding,
> Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!
> (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 126-129)

Muir warns against interpreting this disgust as "Shakespeare's own revulsion against sexuality" as may have been suggested by Harsnett's account of the exorcists' pretence that Sara Williams was, during menstruation, possessed with a devil "in a peculiar part of the body," "in the inferior parts," and "in the most secret part of my body." It must be noted, however, that the vocabulary used here is quite rational and mild. Harsnett, as Muir has argued, does indeed mention evocative phrases such as "filthy fumes," "the bottomlesse pit of hell," "scalded," "thicke smoake & vapour of hell," "brimstone," "vgly blackness, smoake, scorching, boyling and heate" (Muir 1956: 160), but in a completely separate context, fully unconnected with women's sexual organs. This would in fact prove that it is Shakespeare (or, at any rate, Lear) who makes the connection between the dark, sulphurous pit of hell and women's genitals, and not Harsnett, or Jesuit exorcists, or poor misguided Sara.

Timon suffers a parallel plunge into a feminine gynecological hell:

> Common mother, thou
> Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast
> Teems and feeds all; whose self-same mettle
> Whereof thy proud child (arrogant man) is puff'd,
> Engenders the black toad and adder blue,
> The gilded newt and eyeless venom'd worm,
> With all th' abhorred births below crisp heaven
> Whereon Hyperion's quick'ning fire doth shine:
> [...]
> Ensear thy fertile and conceptious womb,
> Let it no more bring out ingrateful man!
> Go great with tigers, dragons, wolves, and bears,
> Teems with new monsters, whom thy upward face
> Hath to the marbled mansion all above
> Never presented!
> (*Timon of Athens*, IV. iii. 177-192)

Burgess notices that *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* were written roughly at the same time and have in common a strong, seemingly unwarranted revulsion at womanhood and sexuality. Timon, in his apt phrase, has a "gratuitous venereal obsession," and Lear "finds in sex a symbol of the hell he wishes on the whole world." Burgess argues that both Lear and Timon

"go beyond simple dramatic necessity in invoking woman as the source of degradation and disease" and surmises that if "Shakespeare was ill with something other than overwork, that something was venereal disease" (Burgess 1970: 197-199).

Although personal experience with venereal disease can certainly cause one to become more puritanical, invoking woman – or, rather, infernal feminine prime matter located in and identified with the female sexual organs – as the source of degradation and disease hardly necessitates contracting syphilis; Neoplatonism will suffice. Lear and Timon rage at female sexuality because they have descended into the bottom of their universes' O's, and are there faced with this prime matter, which they rightly (according to Neoplatonists of all persuasions) see as the root of all that is rotten.

The O of infernal prime matter was often quite literal, tangible, and visible on Shakespeare's stage. Its role was played by the trap on the stage, a standard theatrical property. As Kinney explains:

> The trap in the middle of the stage, in the *platea*, serves the gravediggers in *Hamlet* as they dig in unsacred ground and find Yorick's skull […]. It is the pit in *Titus Andronicus* into which Bassianus' body is thrown and where Quintus and Martius fall, smearing themselves in his blood and thus appearing guilty of his death (2.3). It is also, most commonly, infernal. Joan de Pucell's familiar spirits are "culled Out of the powerful regions under earth" (1 *Henry VI,* 5.3.10-11); it is where the spirit rising for Mother Jordan the witch is commanded by Bolingbroke to "Descend to darkness and the burning lake!" (1 *Henry VI,* 1.4.39). This may be why the trap seems so fitting a place for Malvolio and why Feste thinks of exorcism as the way of bringing him back onstage. But ghosts may issue from the trap, too […] Hamlet's father seems doomed to remain in the trap as one who *"cries under the stage"* (1.5). […] But it is used most frequently by the weird sisters in *Macbeth,* who enter and exit by it. (Kinney 2003: 22)

From it emerge the deceiving liars, demons, witches, and, interestingly enough, Old Hamlet. Iamblichus' warning that "from the hollows of the earth leap chthonian dogs (i.e., daimons), who never show a true sign to a mortal" (Shaw 1995: 41) is strangely appropriate here.

A hero can also actively descend into an O as part of a daring exploratory feat. Part of Hamlet's timeless allure may stem from the fact that his adventurous dealings with matter appear voluntary and that his descent seems to leave him relatively unsullied. He does not fall into the abyss of matter owing to, say, inordinate lust – he plunges in because he feels it his duty to investigate what is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Hamlet in fact undergoes not one, but *three* separate descents into three separate O's analogous with the three faces of the Triple Goddess, the Neoplatonic ruler over matter: the virgin, the mother, and the queen of the underworld.

His first encounter is with the virgin. When he intrudes in Ophelia's closet, her private chambers, "all unbrac'd," he has entered his first O. He renounces her along with all "baser matter," but has still to solve the riddle. Ophelia, though she belongs to the female sex, is not the source of all corruption in Denmark, and ridding himself of her resolves little. As Laoutaris notes, Hamlet's "fixation with "matter" […] increasingly takes on the moralised burden of the maternal body." Shakespeare swiftly moves from the "country matters" of Hamlet's banter with Ophelia to a

> more intricate pun on mother/matter, *mater* (Latin for "mother") still providing the root of the word *mater*nity: "My wit's diseased … as you say, my mother. Therefore no more, but to the matter. My mother, you say … / O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother!" (III. ii. 303-310) Weighted with the hierarchical sexual biology of Aristotelian embryological theory, which defined the female contribution to conception and gestation as gross "matter" acted upon by the masculine motive principle of generation, Hamlet's imaginative penetration into the anatomical reaches of the womb turns it into the origin of the "corruption" which plagues the state. (Laoutaris 2008: 65)

Hamlet's second plunge is into the O of his mother's closet – the place Berry refers to, in Lacanian terms, as the "hollow phallus of the mother" (Berry 2003: 79). Line lucidly observes that Hamlet asks "Now, mother, what's the matter?" (Hamlet, III. iv. 7) on "entering the womb-like cavern of her closet to look into the face of his own substance" (Line 2004: 129). For in Gertrude's private chamber, Hamlet is faced with his material origins. The presence of dead Polonius in Gertrude's closet, much like that of dead Bassanius in Tamora's pit, is no accident. What Hamlet discovers in the O

of the mother is dead, bloody, maternal, menstrual matter that is at the basis of his mortal body. Screaming insults at her, however, does not solve his quandary, as the originating source of all rottenness lies elsewhere.

The O that Hamlet faces last is the gaping hole of Ophelia's grave. Dug in unhallowed ground and spewing forth a medley of skulls and bones, it is eerily reminiscent of the witches' hell-broth, and similarly comprises chaotic, disgusting dead matter. Hamlet has discovered the womb/tomb of Mother Earth, the very bottom of the universe where the hell of prime matter lies, and the real culprit for all chaos, rottenness, and death. He muses on human mortality and the volatility of the earthy matter that even great kings were made of:

> Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?
>
> Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
> Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
> O that that earth which kept the world in awe
> Should patch a wall t'expel the [winter's] flaw!
> (*Hamlet*, V. i. 208-216)

Ophelia's grave, significantly, spits forth the skull of Hamlet's beloved jester Yorick, who, in Rutter's interpretation, comes to speak for her one last time:

> Bizarrely, proleptically, Yorick is Ophelia's double, for "to this favour she must come." The skull makes the audience face up to death's horrors in a materially specific way that Hamlet's philosophizing has managed to avoid. Death, the prince learns from Yorick, stinks. The jester is a substitute who grounds ghastliness, displacing it from Ophelia *now,* for, newly-dead, her corpse still registers her sweetness, while casting imagination forward to Ophelia *then,* in the grave, "instant old," no longer even a body but rotten flesh and jumbled bones. The words Hamlet puts into Yorick's mouth let Ophelia, strangely, speak for the last time – "to this favour she must come." (Rutter 2001: 41)

However, when Hamlet instructs Yorick's skull "Now get you to my lady's [chamber], and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that" (*Hamlet*, V. i. 192-195), we are not necessarily certain *which* lady Hamlet has in mind. He has been to both his ladies' chambers and ascertained that both Gertrude and Ophelia are feminine dead matter that is mere bait and not to be trusted. "My lady" can, in fact, be *any* lady: a woman luring her lover towards carnality (like Ophelia); a mother trapping her child in a mortal body (like Gertrude); or Mother Earth, the dead matter from which it is made merely being painted over with a pleasing shape. Hamlet seems to be echoing Plotinus' sentiment that the material world (and any beautiful body in it) remains forever but a "corpse adorned" (*Enn*., II.4.5.18, cited in Celenza 2002: 79).

Yorick also serves as a surrogate for Hamlet's deceased father – and certainly appears in his memories as more of a true father figure than the late king ever does. Old Hamlet's still fresh grave is, interestingly enough, never visited in the course of Act V, but he is briefly remembered by the gravedigger, who significantly began his career on the day of the late king's victory over Old Norway. Even more significantly, the gravedigger started digging on the very day when Hamlet was born. A more chilling *memento mori* specifically meant for Hamlet would be hard to devise. The two events are actually linked in the graveyard scene as Hamlet contemplates the death of his father, his own impending death, and the end of his line. There is no grandson following Old Hamlet's death that would be heir to his conquest – just as there was no grandson following John Shakespeare's death – either recent or impending at the time *Hamlet* was written (Welsh 2001: 36-37).

Ophelia, who might have been Hamlet's true earthly Venus, his unear'd womb to produce his sons and his bodily immortality, is discarded as "baser matter" and "good kissing carrion," and fittingly thrown into the gaping O in the middle of the stage – and Hamlet leaps in after her, daring the pit to devour him, much as does Romeo. The pit finally does devour all. The Ghost proves to have been her consort, doing her bidding and at last bringing death upon everyone. She wins, as does every O that opens in the tragedies, and there is no escaping this Charybdis.

3. Mother, what's the matter? Mother (en)matters

Jacqueline Rose, replying in her "Sexuality in the reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*" to Eliot's notorious judgment that Hamlet's "mother is not an adequate equivalent" for his disgust, which "envelops and exceeds her" (Eliot 1920), issues a bold statement. Reversing Eliot's argument, she suggests that, rather than attacking the very existence of something "inscrutable, unmanageable or even horrible," one should instead question "an aesthetic theory which will only allow into its definition what can be controlled or managed by art" – such as was Eliot's (although in practice he certainly had his share of excessively disgusted and horrified moments). Rose finds that the true object of horror and disgust in *Hamlet* is "nothing other than femininity itself" (Rose 2002: 103). Given that femininity is in the entire tradition of Western dualistic thought identified with maternity and materiality, and matter is seen as the root of all evil, Hamlet's disgust seems only natural.

The view that the mother provides only base menstrual matter in procreation while the father provides the spiritual form was expounded by Plato, elaborated by Aristotle, and even propounded by the likes of Aquinas. All-pervasive before the discovery of the ovum (Allen 1997), it was demonstrably held by Shakespeare. Helen herself warns a potential husband: "You are too young, too happy, and too good, / To make yourself a son out of my blood" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, II. iii. 96-97). Sebastian likewise explicates this distinctly dualistic view in *Twelfth Night*: "A spirit I am indeed, / But am in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate" (*Twelfth Night*, V. i. 236-238).

The mother does not merely make us material; she also makes us mortal, as without embodiment, we could have happily remained pure eternal spirits. As Janet Adelman explains: "The mother's body brings death into the world because her body itself is death: in the traditional alignment of spirit and matter, the mother gives us the stuff – the female matter – of our bodies and thus our mortality" (Adelman 1992: 27; cited in Armstrong P. 2006: 185). This "traditional alignment" which harks from Plato and Neoplatonism necessitates Hamlet's and other tragic heroes' realization that maternal matter makes us mortal and that vulgar Venus creates us only to destroy us.

This is at the root of the persistent and sinister association between motherhood and mortality, between mothering and murdering, between

womb and tomb. It appears in Cleopatra's disturbing oath made to Antony: "The next Caesarion [smite], / Till by degrees the memory of my womb [...] / Lie graveless" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. xiii. 162-166). It varies from Romeo's "womb of death" aimed at Juliet's tomb through Friar Lawrence's jovial and casual "The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb" to Rosse's lament that Scotland can no longer be "call'd our mother, but our grave" which seems on the surface to have little to do with metaphysical issues. That the enmattering mother is also a murderess plainly follows from the dualistic logic of Neoplatonism, and finds many expressions in Shakespeare's work.

Cases in point are the disturbing images of breastfeeding portraying a helpless male child in danger of bloody violence perpetrated by the mother. Lady Macbeth notoriously threatens her perhaps imaginary infant:

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dash'd the brains out.
> (*Macbeth*, I. vii. 54-58)

Volumnia's threat to her own son is perhaps less direct but no less disturbing:

> The breasts of Hecuba,
> When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier
> Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood
> At Grecian sword.
> (*Coriolanus*, I. iii. 40-43)

She finally manages to effect Coriolanus' death by equating her womb with Rome as his native land:

> thou shalt no sooner
> March to assault thy country that to tread
> [...] on thy mother's womb
> That brought thee to this world.
> (*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 122-125)

For Coriolanus, Rome is the monstrous multitude which desires his bloody wounds – much like his mother does. The multitude, elsewhere associated with chaotic lower matter, is here explicitly linked with the mother's womb. The many-headed monster that finally overwhelms Coriolanus certainly also comprises his mother, as well as the two mutually indistinguishable multitudes – the Roman and the Volscian – that offer to destroy him at differing points in time. Defeating her son, this monstrous maternal O will devour him:

> O mother, mother!
> [...] O my mother, mother! O!
> You have won a happy victory to Rome;
> But, for your son
> [...] most mortal to him.
> (*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 185-189)

Rome and Volumnia are thus one – the mother that here metaphorically eats her young. Timon is even more explicitly being eaten by the multitude of Athens. As Apemantus notices, "what a number of men eats Timon, and he sees 'em not!" (*Timon of Athens*, I. ii. 39-40). Tamora is *literally* a mother that eats her young, as Titus uses deception to force her to "like to the earth swallow her own increase." (*Titus Andronicus*, V. ii. 191)

The womb-tomb that eats her own young is not Shakespeare's invention nor is it without precedent. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Errour's misshapen offspring crawl around her in the darkness, but "Soone as that uncouth light upon them shone, / Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone." (I. I. xv. 8-9) This is simply what the O of maternal prime matter does in Neoplatonic dualism.

4. Nothing of woman: motherfree

It is understandable – given the usual attributes coupled with maternal materiality in Renaissance Neoplatonism – that so many Shakespeare's heroes attempt to evade any association with the feminine. Before her death, as Cleopatra grows determined and "marble-constant," she feels impelled to claim: "I have nothing / Of woman in me" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 238-239). Renouncing her femininity apparently allows

Cleopatra to assume a masculine fixity of spirit. The statement can also be read as a humorous aside of the boy actor playing Cleopatra's role, who truly would have been granted the liberty to claim to have nothing of woman in him.

"Nothing of woman" can, however, also be linked with the desire that some heroes have to break free from the maternal body in which they were tragically enmattered and thus to *not have anything* of woman in them. I would like to term this an aspiration to be "motherfree" – adding the suffix which is used to denote a "lack" that is seen as positive and advantageous.[1] Ficino's "heavenly Venus," as opposed to her earthly, "vulgar" counterpart, is said to have been born without a mother, which makes her a stranger to matter, and thus exalted and free.

To be of woman born is a heavy burden to bear and makes one vulnerable to all that flesh is heir to: pain, illness, death, and worst of all – lust. When the puritanical boy rejects her advances, Vulgar Venus asks Adonis: "Art thou a woman's son and canst not feel / What 'tis to love, how want of love tormenteth?" (*Venus and Adonis*, 201-202). She scolds him that he is a "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!" (*Venus and Adonis*, 214). A similar sentiment is found in Sonnet 41: "And when a woman woos, what woman's son / Will sourly leave her till [she] have prevailed?" (Sonnet 41, 7-8). Freedom from being born to a mother is freedom from lust and entanglements with women – which does not seem like a bad thing at all in the Neoplatonic value system.

Being motherfree confers other privileges as well. In a vision provided by the witches, a bloody child tells Macbeth that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (*Macbeth*, IV. i. 80-81). What Macbeth does not immediately realize is that he will indeed be harmed – only by someone *not* "of woman born." The bloody child anticipates Macduff, who, "untimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb, and thus free from the maternal body, can slay Macbeth and carry a victory over Hecate. To be motherfree is to be virtuous, valiant, truly masculine, and impervious to the evil effects of matter. Posthumus (also "ripp'd" from his mother) asserts that "There's no motion / That tends to vice in man, but I affirm / It is the woman's part" (*Cymbeline*, II. v. 20-22). Minimizing "the woman's part" in a child maximizes the chances that the child will be a decent and virtuous human being. Leontes is glad that Hermione did not nurse the boy, as she already

[1] Note the use of the suffix "-free" in the name for the Childfree movement – the movement of happily and intentionally "childless" individuals and couples.

has "too much blood in him." Mother's milk, as the contemporary physician John Sadler insists, it should be noted here, "is nothing but the monstrous bloud made whitte in the breasts" (Laoutaris 2008: 171).

5. The ladies have prevail'd

Would-be motherfree heroes may sometimes attempt to sever their associations with maternal matter in somewhat violent ways. Coriolanus faces this chaotic substance in "the mutable, rank-scented meiny" which, according to him, is a Hydra and a monster – the beast with many heads (*Coriolanus*, III. i. 66-71). He "banishes" the maternal material multitude:

> You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
> As reek a' th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
> As the dead carcasses of unburied men
> That do corrupt my air – I banish you!
> (*Coriolanus*, III. iii. 120-123)

It is this maternal material monster that he attempts to escape when he "elopes" into Aufidius' open arms – much like Othello does with Iago.

However, there is really no banishing or escaping one's feminine basis and origins. The triple goddess, who reigns over matter, will usually win in Shakespeare's darker plays. It might be useful to remember here that the triple goddess – part of the Neoplatonic tradition – was comprised of three goddesses: infernal Persephone/Hecate, benevolent maternal nature represented by Demeter/Ceres, and Artemis/Diana, the virgin goddess of the new moon (Line 2004: 28).

It is precisely this trio of goddesses that appears before Coriolanus and assures him that resistance is futile and that he cannot destroy or escape the maternal womb and the monstrous multitude of his native Rome: Volumnia, "the most noble mother in the world" – and the sinister manly witch who is fooling no one, Virgilia, the benign young wife and mother, and the utterly gratuitous virgin Valeria – clearly there only to complete the triple goddess in the most clichéd way imaginable – "The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle / That's curdied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Dian's temple." (*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 65-67). "The ladies have prevail'd" (*Coriolanus*, V. iv. 40), the news goes, and when the three

ladies enter Rome triumphantly, a Senator exclaims "Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!" (*Coriolanus*, V. v. 1). For all the talk of virtue and virility, Rome in effect worships – and is apparently ruled by – the triple goddess, and Coriolanus does not stand a chance against her. He belongs to her.

For Coriolanus is "a thing of blood." Frequently covered in blood, he may superficially resemble in imagery the "bloody man"/"bloody child" of *Macbeth*. The "bloody child" in *Macbeth* – bloody because he has been "ripp'd" from his mother's womb – indicates, however, a radical cut from the mother, being motherfree and thus free from matter as well: Macduff, free from the materiality of the maternal body, can slay Hecate's consort Macbeth. Coriolanus, on the other hand, who "from face to foot" is "a thing of blood" (*Coriolanus*, II. ii. 108-109), is entirely his mother's, a part of her body, constantly returning to it, struggling to be born and separated, and will be reabsorbed by her when he is devoured by the multitude.

The ladies have similarly prevail'd against Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well*. The triple goddess tricks him after he has attempted to renounce women, and he is finally faced with a trio of women: the pure virgin Dian, the pregnant mother Helen, and the old Widow, who demonstrate to him that he cannot flee materiality and that he is indeed already trapped in it.

6. Nothing of woman: 0 = 0

There is yet another way in which to interpret Cleopatra's assertion that she has "nothing of woman" in her. In most Neoplatonic thought, prime matter is viewed as privation – and thus literally *nothing* (Celenza 2002: 75-76). Therefore, whoever is meant to be saying this – however "constant" Cleopatra is and however male-bodied the boy actor is – neither can escape the fact that they were enmattered in their mothers' wombs and that they consequently have in them the nothing of prime matter that is at the basis of every living human being. We all have, according to Neoplatonists, the *nothing* of woman in us, the nothing of maternal mortal matter we inherited from our mothers. This enables Hamlet to play with his eerie rhymes and claim that

> The King is a thing –
> Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?
> Hamlet: Of nothing, bring me to him.
> (*Hamlet*, IV. i. 27-30)

It is irrelevant here which king Hamlet has in mind, as the (still) living king is, just as much as the dead one, a thing of nothing, made of the nothingness of matter.

The fact that Neoplatonism so often equated prime matter with privation, the void, nothingness itself, solidifies the meanings associated with "Shakespeare's tragic O's" and adds to them. "O," "nothing," and "hell" are all things an Elizabethan might use to refer to female genitals; they can also, significantly, denote feminine maternal matter. The void of O is the womb we are enmattered in and the tomb we will be devoured by in death.

Showalter declares in her "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism" that Ophelia, consistently with the customary representations of femininity, is "certainly a creature of lack." "I think nothing, my lord," she says in the Mousetrap scene, to which he retorts:

> Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
> Ophelia: What is, my lord?
> Hamlet: Nothing.
> (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 117–19)

Showalter notes that in Elizabethan slang "nothing" was a term for the vagina, but that its meanings are further proliferated in a distinctly feminine paradigm. To Hamlet, she explains,

> "nothing" is what lies between maids' legs, for, in the male visual system of representation and desire, women's sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, "represent the horror of having nothing to see." When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that "Her speech is nothing," mere "unshaped use." Ophelia's speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes the Story of O – the

> zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality (Parker/Hartman 1985: 78-79).

The nothing of the vagina and the nothing of the chaotic, irrational incoherence of feminine madness are both ultimately the nothing of unformed prime matter.

"Nothing" is thus deservedly the crucial key word of the tragedies – the original problem, the posed question, the stumbling block, but also the usually unsatisfactory solution. All the "ocular proof" and "auricular evidence" that the tragedies ultimately give in response to the probing questions of the neurotic male heroes can boil down to "nothing" – the nothing of dark, unformed prime matter.

The apparently widespread contemporary notion that "prime matter" could fully be equated with "nothing" is attributable to one of the bolder moves in the history of ideas, occurring right around Shakespeare's time as part of an effort to reconcile traditional monotheistic religions with the increasingly popular dualistic ideas spreading as part of the package of Renaissance Neoplatonism.

The entire subject of the origin of the cosmos was rife with controversy in Shakespeare's time and there was an ongoing debate between the so-called pagan prima-materialists and the Christian ex-nihilists. Plato and Aristotle unproblematically claimed that the cosmos was created from chaotic prime matter in a culture whose creation myths shared the same narrative. However, adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition had to see the very notion of prime matter as heretical because it directly contradicted the Biblical doctrine of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This notion was, nonetheless, being heartily espoused by learned people who read Plato and Aristotle, and with increasing frequency.

William R. Elton cites in his informative "*Deus Absconditus: Lear*" some of the arguments that Christian authors used to denounce the pagan notion of prime matter. Some of these belie a great deal of anxiety, as the arguments of pagan philosophers seemed to make quite a bit of logical sense. Mutian categorically announces: "We leave behind the entelechy of Aristotle and the ideas of Plato. God created all things from nothing." Montaigne sees the reasoning that "Because nothing is made of nothing: God was not able to frame the world without matter" as proof of the vanity of feeble human understanding, and Robert Parsons similarly exalts the doctrine of ex-nihilism as "high and hidden doctrine," beyond the merely human capacity of comprehension. A contemporary of Shakespeare's, R.

B., Esquire, prays to God in *The Difference betwene the Auncient Phisicke and the Latter Phisicke* (1585) to "teach, ayd, & assist thy servants against the heathnish and false Philosophie of Aristotle, which teacheth" that "of nothyng, nothyng can be made" (Elton 2008: 252). Apparently, this was a hot and anxiety-inducing issue.

A potential solution was long before offered by the early Neoplatonists – who, not being bound by the Torah, needed no such solution. According to Plotinus, as paraphrased by Celenza, "matter, even when informed, retains its ontological status as anti-substantial, evil privation" (Celenza 2002: 79). This solution was then embraced by some of the dualists who wished to hold on to at least part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Gnostics saw the cosmos as formed from dark prime matter by the blundering Demiurge – very differently than the Jews and the Christians. This matter, however, resulted from the shadow cast by the curtain separating the realm of light from Sophia's prideful creation. The substance of matter is, thus, nothing but shadow, which is nothing other than the absence of light – which is *nothing*. Cabalists – notably Maimonides – similarly took the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* very seriously, but saw this "nothing" as the abyss of prime matter that was within En Sof and has since been continuously being overcome in creation (Armstrong K. 2007: 149).

Christian Neoplatonists in the Renaissance, faced with a similar problem, adopted a similar solution. The brilliant, if audacious turn in contemporary thought connecting and reconciling the debating parties – the traditionally and "naïvely" monotheistic with the popularly and "scientifically" dualistic – appears to have originated in the mind of the mathematician Thomas Harriot, Raleigh's protégé, member of the mythical School of Night, and probably an acquaintance of Shakespeare's. According to Aubrey, at one point, Harriot did not value "the old storie of the Creation of the World. He could not beleeve the old position; he would say *ex nihilo nihil fit*" (Elton 2008: 254). However, in his writings there is also a marginal note that states: "*Ex nihilo nihil fit; sed omnia fint ex nihilo*" – out of nothing nothing is made; yet everything is made out of nothing (Turner 1999: 35). This seemingly paradoxical addendum to Aristotle's insufficiently imaginative dictum in effect reconciles the "pagan prima-materialists" with the "Christian ex-nihilists" in the Christian Neoplatonic vision of the cosmos fashioned from the "nothing" – the void, the O/0 – that *is* prime matter.

For the womblike and vaginally suggestive "nothing" – the O – of feminine matter is simultaneously the absolute nothing – the 0 – that prime matter is. As Frederick Turner reveals in his brilliant *Shakespeare's Twenty-First-Century Economics: The Morality of Love and Money*, despite centuries of previous contact between the Arab world and Europe, the zero only made its way into Christendom in the fourteenth century, and "it was only in Shakespeare's time that its full power as a concept and as a source of mathematical ideas began to be realized." Lear's Fool is obviously fascinated by its ramifications:

> When Lear's Fool wants to find the ultimate description of the nonexistence to which Lear has reduced himself by giving away his kingdom, he says to his master: "Now thou art an O without a figure" (*King Lear*, I. iv. 193). What he means is that if Lear had a figure or digit, say 8 or 2 or 5, followed by a zero (an "O"), then he would have eighty or twenty or fifty; but as it is, he has only the zero, he has nothing. Or rather, is nothing. There is something utterly chilling about this image; the Fool is insisting on a meaning for zero that is not simply as a conventional placeholding sign to signify tens or hundreds or thousands, but the mysterious void itself. (Turner 1999: 36)

This is what Lear encounters in the stormy wilderness: the void of prime matter as the basis of the cosmos and his own frail body – and this is what he has been reduced to. Gloucester lucidly observes, on seeing Lear mad: "O ruin'd piece of nature! This great world / Shall so wear out to nought" (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 134-135). Lear is here compared to the cosmos, and both will, without the forming spirit, eventually revert to the "nought" – the zero – of chaotic, unformed matter. The abdicated king is being schooled in the paradoxical cosmogony and cosmology of Christian Neoplatonism, which is at variance both with the naïve-sounding traditional monism of *creatio ex nihilo* and with the popular scientific-seeming but unimaginative materialism of Aristotle's *ex nihilo nihil fit* which Hobbes dryly explicates "because nothing, however it be multiplied, will for ever be nothing" (Elton 2008: 254). Apparently, Lear is initially a staunch follower of Aristotle and Hobbes, as can be seen in his opening dispute with Cordelia, who has "nothing" to offer him:

Lear: what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

> Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.
> Lear: Nothing?
> Cordelia: Nothing.
> Lear: Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.
> (*King Lear*, I. i. 85-89)

Conversely, Lear is able to say to Goneril when Regan only allows him to keep twenty-five retainers: "Your fifty yet doth double five and twenty, / And thou art twice her love" (*King Lear*, II. iv. 268-269). Both their "loves" will eventually "wear out to nought" – deflate to zero – as neither daughter will ultimately allow him a single servant. An O/0 without a figure, however it be multiplied, remains nothing. The characters heavily associated with lower matter – Edmund, Goneril, and Regan – will, attempting to multiply their material possessions (which are in themselves nothing, as matter is nothing) predictably end up with nothing.

In contrast, the less materialistic characters – Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, Gloucester, and Lear – are all more or less voluntarily reduced to nothing/0 in the course of the play. Cordelia has "nothing" to offer, either to her father and her new husband. Edgar becomes poor Tom, a "poor, bare, fork'd animal," "the thing itself," realizing that "Edgar I nothing am" (*King Lear*, II. iii. 21). Kent is put in the stocks for serving the King, and Gloucester is blinded and leaps into the abyss. Lear is reduced to an O/0 without a figure, and he has apparently still not learned his lesson:

> Fool: Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?
> Lear: Why, no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing.
> (*King Lear*, I. iv. 132-133)

What he needs to realize is that everything is made out of nothing – something even young Romeo seems to understand when he exclaims "O any thing, of nothing first [create]!" (*Romeo and Juliet*, I. i. 177). The universe is created out of the nothingness of feminine prime matter, the "Nothing, the middle, the female genitals, procreation" (Berry 2002: 152) that Lear has attempted to banish with Cordelia, the spurned, despised zero which turns out to be "the womb of all" (Turner 1999: 43). Apparently, the appropriate mathematical operation is putting a "figure" – a digit – before the 0, and not multiplying it. The chaotic dark feminine nothing of matter, led, guided, and lovingly formed by masculine numerical spirit, makes the

universe. The way the universe is created on the cosmic level is analogous to the way a child is made by the male spirit forming the nothingness of menstrual matter, and both operations paradoxically make something out of nothing.

7. Conclusion

The Neoplatonic concept of matter can indeed help illuminate Shakespeare's "tragic O's," a figure which can be shown to connect multiple images of matter as the maternal/infernal void. In Shakespeare's darker plays, the "O" as prime matter can figure as a circular O-shaped locus for the encounter with primordial matter, the womb/tomb that enmatters and thus kills, "hell" and "nothing" that can indicate both unformed matter and the vaginal orifice, and the nothing – the 0 – out of which everything is made.

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Даница Игрутиновић

НИШТА ОД ЖЕНЕ: АМБИС ФЕМИНИНЕ МАТЕРИЈЕ
У ШЕКСПИРА

Сажетак

Проучавање метафизике ренесансног неоплатонизма помаже да се додатно појасне неке фигуре које се појављују у Шекспировим делима. Позивајући се на неоплатоничарски концепт материје, овај рад представља покушај да се прошири и додатно расветли фигура коју је Филипа Бери назвала Шекспировим трагичним *О* (2002). Показује се како ова фигура повезује неколике приказе материје као истовремено материнског и пакленог амбиса, што је у складу са неоплатоничарским концептом примордијалне материје. У Шекспировим трагедијама и проблемским драмама *О* као феминино детерминисана примордијална материја фигурира као место сусрета са примордијалном материјом, материца/гробница која убија тиме што даје смртно материјално тело, *пакао* и *ништа(вило)* који могу назначити и неформирану материју и вагинални отвор, као и ништа(вило), нула – 0 – из које настаје све.

Кључне речи: ренесансни неоплатонизам, матер(ија), ништа(вило), О