Lacan and the Mirror Stage

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan first developed his theory of the mirror stage in response to Sigmund Freud’s notion of an ego-based psychology, which itself served to suggest a decidedly rational form of self-consciousness which Lacan rejected. According to Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage, a child recognizes his own image in a mirror sometime before he is 18 months old, an event which marks the child’s first realization of self-hood. This sudden realization of self leads the child, according to Lacan, to the realization not only of his possession of his own identity that renders him distinct and separate from others but, moreover, the realization of the existence of others independent of himself and the differences between subject and object. Lacan further posited that this realization of self through reflection that occurs during the mirror stage illustrates the manner in which people recognize and create themselves through the image they recognize of other people, and in turn suggests that our identities are structured upon our understanding of the image (or reflection) of other people as well as the realization of the difference between ourselves and others. Lacan ultimately felt—unlike Freud—that human identity is not consistent but is instead a constantly changing assemblage of images and understandings of self. Lacan contended that once the mirror stage of one’s psychological development has ceased, the subject has created a series of false or inauthentic identity systems around himself and that even close psychological analysis cannot break through those inauthentic identities to arrive back at a true and ultimate self. What Lacan ultimately asserted was that the human psyche is, itself, structured entirely by and through language acts—for people recognize and consider others through language, hence identity is constructed largely through language—and does not arise or exist separate from such once the mirror stage has been entered.

Application in Shakespeare’s Hamlet

Lacan wrote about Hamlet in his famous essay “Desire and Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet,” in which he examined the linguistic structure of the play and argued, counter to Freud’s rather psychosexual reading of the play, that Hamlet is assuming the role of the “phallus”—that is, the role of his father or patriarch—in the play and, hence, is increasingly removed from any sort of reality and central identity, which in turn greatly upsets his psyche. Hamlet constructs his identity at the start of the play under the influence of his dead father’s identity (something which Shakespeare highlights by giving Hamlet and his father the same name). A theorist making use of Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage might also argue that Hamlet perfectly exemplifies someone who lacks a core, fundamental identity, and possesses an identity which only reflects others’ identities. Shakespeare presents Hamlet’s psychic state and identity as constantly shifting throughout the play without offering any suggestions of there being a core or fundamental identity within him. Instead, Shakespeare figures Hamlet as possessing a psyche which is in a state of near constant flux, just as Lacan conceptualized all people who emerge from the mirror stage as being lacking in a core identity. While a Lacanian theorist would not suggest that Shakespeare invented a theory of the mirror stage in the
play, he or she might suggest that Shakespeare’s play reflects, itself, an element of human psychology that would be conceptualized three centuries later by Lacan.

**Study Question:**

1. Why is the mirror stage of human development considered to be so important to the construction of identity?