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Literary Theory and Writing

Professor Scheler

“Frailty, Thy Name is Woman!”: How Hamlet Confronts and Clings to the Gender Binary

One of the most obvious driving forces in *Hamlet* is the heavy mourning the title character exhibits for his lost, murdered father—Hamlet's grief and quest for revenge is understandable as a reaction from someone who has lost something precious. But what is so troubling about Hamlet's subsequent cyclone of emotions is that, entrenched in his mourning, Hamlet verbally attacks both his mother, Gertrude, and his love interest, Ophelia, with seemingly off-topic insults about their sexuality and their attitudes toward the various situations at hand. This is especially curious and problematic because Gertrude and Ophelia are the only named women in the play—and to ignore the gender politics entrenched in Hamlet's attack on them is to deny gender its significance within the play as a whole. With the help of Judith Butler's methodological work in *Gender Trouble*, sense can be made of why Hamlet, in his most vulnerable moments, goes after the less-distressed women around him: because he is seeing his sorrow and their lack thereof as a weakness that goes against his presupposed identity as a man, and disrupts the socially-constructed gender binary, where men are strong and women are to be pitied. Hamlet in mourning finds himself acting in a manner perceived as “womanlike,” and the insecurities that result from such a label in combination with the “manlier” behavior of the women around him move him to attempt a reassertion of the gender binary and of its subsequent depiction of women as “weak.” He does so by identifying and condemning other “weak,”

“womanly” behaviors he can see performed by Ophelia and Gertrude, attempting to establish them once more as “woman” and himself as the strong and respectable “man.”

Judith Butler's account for the social constructs of gender within her methodology stresses the reality of how gendered behaviors, actions, and identity are merely manifested from a societal body. In fact, Butler goes so far as to say that social politics imply a “redescription of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy” (Butler 2496) and that “the gendered body is performative...it has no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality” (2497). In essence, there is no physical foundation for gender, biological or otherwise; it is an identity constructed from our actions and how we associate those actions with a perceived gender: male or female. This in turn fabricates a strict gender binary that is not essential to humankind, but nevertheless exists and creates imaginary, impossible goals for those entrenched in this binary, primarily the goals of being like the fictitious “ideal man” or “ideal woman.” Butler comments on how a clear representation of one's gender is “desired for, wished for, idealized” (2497), but yet, these idealized versions of each gender are unattainable, for gender is a spectrum, not a binary, and every individual realistically falls somewhere in between. This likely creates a significant amount of pressure for those who lament to find themselves more “in the middle” than they would like, especially for self-identifying men who believe in the societal fiction that the “ideal,” hyper-masculine man is worth more than the “ideal,” effeminate woman, and failure to be as masculine as possible lowers a man's value. Thus, when men chain themselves to these impossible and fictional standards, perhaps they might go out of their way to fight to keep the gender binary intact, so that they might remain “men” in their people's eyes and reap the societal benefits.

Scholar Janet Adelman toys with the functions of gender in *Hamlet*, and although she employs a much different methodology than Butler's and focuses more on the play of the maternal and paternal bodies inside the text, there is one section of her argument that hints at how Hamlet struggles with the deterioration of the expected gender standards in his own life and family. Most of Adelman's work is a discussion on Hamlet's disgust with his mother's sexuality from the perspective of a son, but later on, she brings in the idea that Hamlet's disgust is in part a result of his perception that "the male body [is] spoiled by the female in intercourse" (Adelman 267), acknowledging Hamlet's belief that the socially-constructed "man" is purer or more valuable than the "woman." Adelman then implies this idea further, suggesting "Hamlet imagines man struggling against his one defect—the mark of his bondage to a feminized Nature or Fortune." While just a small piece of Adelman's larger argument, the notion that Hamlet sees feminine nature as a "defect" implies his commitment to the gender binary Butler critiques, and also implies Hamlet must think if he acts in a way perceived as "feminine" by societal standards, he will be "contaminated" (266) and need to combat that contamination and reestablish himself as a man in terms of what the idealized man looks like in his society.

In the play itself, it is easily seen how Hamlet is imprisoned by the gendered expectations of the world around him, and is humiliated when called out for performing actions associated with the binary female—notably, the act of mourning, which is established within the societal structure of the play as something feminine. The first time Hamlet is ever seen with his family, he is criticized by his uncle for grieving over his father, when grief is an "inappropriate" reaction for this society's "man": "But to persever/ In obstinate condolement is a course/ Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief" (*Hamlet* 1.2.92-94). In contrast, when later on in the play Ophelia's own father is murdered, it is said that when she "speaks much of her father" (4.5.4)

“her mood will needs be pitied” (3), for since she is a woman in her society, grief is natural, to be expected; the idealized woman is weak and submissive to emotion. Therefore, being chastised for his vulnerability must create a great deal of dissonance for Hamlet, who knows his society’s ideal man is strong and does not mourn as the “weaker” sex does. Hamlet exhibits this frustration when Claudius exits, instantly launching into a self-loathing soliloquy, lamenting, “O that this too too sallied flesh would melt” (1.2 129), clearly hurt, embarrassed, and enraged by the comments made about him. This scene in a gender-centered context establishes the expectations of the gender binary in Hamlet’s society, and precedents how Hamlet cannot bear his disruption of that dichotomy if it makes him appear more traditionally feminine—and therefore “weak.”

But it is not just his own actions that call Hamlet’s attention to the atypical portrayals of gender around him, for in that same aforementioned soliloquy, we see Hamlet move from a self-loathing ramble to a bitter discussion of his mother and an attempted put-down of women like her, and women in general. He reasserts the societal conclusion that “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (126) and attacks the manner in which his mother fails to perform her own “womanly” grief at Old Hamlet’s death: “O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourn’d longer” (150-151). Without the help of Butler, it might seem as though Hamlet is only criticizing Gertrude for her disrespect of his father’s honor, but the fact that Hamlet was just reprimanded for acting outside the gender binary by mourning makes it apparent how he might be furious at his mother because of his own stubborn grip on fictional gender expectations. Gertrude, as a woman, is not even in mourning for Old Hamlet herself, making her calm behavior more “manly” than Hamlet’s, according to their society’s gender standards on grief. Hamlet cannot wrap his head around it, and claims “it cannot come to good” (158) how his mother is acting. He is both furious and afraid—for not only is Hamlet slipping away from the unattainable dream of

being the “ideal man,” but his mother is no longer playing the part of his kingdom’s ideal, pitiable, submissive woman, and he cannot bear it.

And so, Hamlet in his panic and fury seeks to reassert the crumbling gender roles wherever he can, rejecting their deconstruction in favor of the binary. If he cannot “outman” Gertrude when it comes to mourning, Hamlet must find another way to establish himself once more as a “man” and Gertrude as a “woman” so that he no longer feels weak and looked down upon by Claudius and the rest of his family. The imaginary binary becomes a weapon to Hamlet—he looks for what he can still see as “womanly” within Gertrude, and aggressively calls it into the spotlight. When he is alone with her, he chooses to pinpoint her sexuality, proclaiming her disgusting for having sex with Claudius: “Nay, but to live/ In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,/ Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love/ Over the nasty sty!” (3.4 91-94). Instead of staying focused on the betrayal done to his father, Hamlet takes the time to sidetrack to the topic of sexual endeavors, berating Gertrude for giving herself to Claudius—even when his mother pleads for him to stop his verbal onslaught: “O, speak to me no more!/ These words like daggers enter in my ears” (95-96). By attempting to put his mother in her place for her “piteous action,” (126) Hamlet also attempts to assert a “manly” dominance over Gertrude and the sinful, “womanly” way she lets “the bloat king tempt [her] again to bed” (181). In Gertrude’s sexual endeavors, Hamlet can still see the expectations of the gender binary: women as weak, shameful creatures easily overpowered and tempted by men. He takes the time to evidence the “truth” of that binary expectation with Gertrude’s behavior so he can distance himself and his own behavior from her “womanly” image. Hamlet is already enraged at the “unmanly” mourning he presented, and going out of his way to put his mother back in her socially-expected place is a way for Hamlet to prove he is still more of a “man” than women like Gertrude. He even finishes

the scene by telling Gertrude to “go not to [his] uncle's bed” (160) and instead “repent what's past, avoid what is to come” (150)—noting his own virtue in contrast to her vice (152-154). A low blow, but it's a way for Hamlet to feel as though his masculinity is not lost after all.

It is not even his mother alone whom Hamlet attempts to wield the gender binary weapon on—he attacks his love interest, Ophelia, in a similar way, proving his gender-based fears extend deeper than just his own and his mother's deviance. Ophelia is introduced as a traditionally submissive feminine character who allows her father and brother to dictate the extent (and end) of her romantic and sexual life (1.3 1-136), but from Hamlet's perspective, he only sees that she is a woman who successfully takes the authority to break off their relationship. Ophelia comments to her father on the action: “as you did command/ I did repel his letters, and denied/ His access to me” (2.1 105-107). Polonius notes in turn that “that hath made [Hamlet] mad” (108), and apart from the obvious fact that any man would be upset to be dumped, in Hamlet's gender-sensitive state after Claudius' comments on his “unmanliness,” Ophelia seemingly taking charge and dismissing him would come off as another shot to Hamlet's already-shattering picture of his own masculinity. If the “ideal female” is mournful and submissive, Ophelia's assertiveness would offend Hamlet's loyalty to his society's gender binary even further.

And just like with Gertrude, he seeks to correct this disrespect of his beloved binary by attacking the “female” identity and sexuality he can still see in place around him, this time in Ophelia. Hamlet has no plot-related reason to shame Ophelia for society's negative associations with her gender, but yet he clearly feels the need on an internal level, as he claims that “wise men know/ well enough what monsters you [women] make of them” (3.2 137-138). He also suggests that women “jig and amble, and you [lisp,] you nickname God's/ creatures and make your wantonness [your] ignorance” (143-144), demeaning them again to their sexuality. Hamlet

**Comment [RJ1]:** As much as I adore this sentence – I think it's wonderful – it doesn't really fit with the language from the rest of the piece. You've built up a beautiful language throughout the paper and this one bit seems a bit out of place with its modern phrasing.

goes on extensively about the sinful and otherwise destructive nature of women, according to the binary he seeks to reassert, pretending he comes out as the “wise man” who knows not to trust women like Ophelia. This aggressive display and Ophelia's subsequent dejected submission (149-160) would allow Hamlet to feel as though Ophelia's performance of womanly weakness contrasted with his “wisdom” validates his binary masculinity after all, despite his earlier mourning. It also extends his bullying self-reassurances outside of only his mother and onto a larger representation of women, so that he can further feel manly and validated in comparison.

A perspective through the lens of Butler's gender theory is just one of many explanations for Hamlet's abrasive behavior toward the play's two female characters, but it does largely make sense of why Gertrude and Ophelia are the two characters who receive the bulk of Hamlet's verbal aggression, and are extensively called out for the way they behave as “women,” if the binary-believing Hamlet wants to feel more like a man. It is these societal expectations about how the idealized man and woman should behave that paralyze Hamlet in his tracks, urging him to relentlessly attack what he sees in Gertrude and Ophelia as “feminine,” because he cannot bear to see any femininity with himself—since being perceived as a man in his society is unfortunately worth more than being perceived as a woman, as is seen through Claudius' and Hamlet's sexist scorn. Even more unfortunately, that attitude is still held in place by most modern societies, where there remains a deep-seated urge to cling onto the mythical gender binary and the idea that men and women should behave, perform, and *conform* in ways according to that binary. Perhaps one day, Butler's hopes will come to fruition, and the binary will disappear altogether—and those like Hamlet can feel secure in their identity without the problematic urge to put down the “femininity” in themselves and others, recognizing all forms of gender expression as equal.

Works Cited

- Adelman, Janet. "'Man and Wife Is One Flesh': *Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body." *Hamlet*. Ed. Susanne L. Wofford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994. 256-82.
- Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001. 2485-2501.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. 1603. *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Susanne L. Wofford. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994. Print.

**Comment [RJ2]:** Woo. I really liked this paper. Your argument is very well thought, and planned, out which makes it easy to understand, despite your advanced language. The wording you use at times is a little complicated and I found myself having to reread a few sentences, so I might go through and simplify a bit if possible, but it was still very well written

**Comment [RJ3]:** One thing that might be interesting is to get the viewpoints of one or two other male characters besides Hamlet. You mention Ophelia's father but don't really go into detail. I think it would be interesting if you discussed how Hamlet's view differs from the other men in the play when it comes to his mother and Ophelia. JUST A THOUGHT. You don't have to do this if you don't want to.