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

An obvious driving force in *Hamlet* is the heavy mourning the title character exhibits for his lost, murdered father—Hamlet's grief is an understandable reaction from someone who has lost something precious. But what is so troubling about Hamlet's ensuing cyclone of emotions is that, in his bereavement, 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. Perhaps Hamlet sees his sorrow and their lack thereof as a weakness disrupting his presupposed identity as a man—for in the socially-constructed gender binary of his people, men are strong and more respectable than women. 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. He does so by identifying and condemning other “womanly” behaviors he can still see performed by Ophelia and Gertrude, so that he may perceive them as weak women back in their “rightful place,” and himself as a respectable man by comparison. This establishes

Hamlet as an oppressor surveilling sexist gender performances and refusing to let sexist gender roles die, but also as a victim of society conditioned and pressured to perform harmful masculine behaviors himself, out of fear and anxiety.

Scholar Janet Adelman toys with the functions of gender in *Hamlet*, although she does not consider the larger cultural implications of the gender binary in the way that Judith Butler does. Adelman suggests “Hamlet imagines man struggling against his one defect—the mark of his bondage to a feminized Nature or Fortune” (Adelman 267), but it is Butler that offers an explanation for why there is so much socially at stake for Hamlet—or anyone—in a gendered world. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* stresses the reality of how gendered behaviors 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). To Butler, gender is not just a physical concept, but an identity constructed from our actions and how we associate those actions with a perceived gender: ultimately 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 subjected to it, 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 a polarized concept gender is fictitious, 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 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—even if Butler herself believes the deconstruction of the gender binary is something to celebrate, not reject.

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). Since she is a woman in her society, grief is natural, to be expected; the ideal woman is weak and submissive to emotion. Therefore, being surveilled 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.” In this sense, he is victimized by the binary that surrounds him.

And 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, Hamlet moves 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 declares of his mother that “frailty, thy name is woman!” (126) because she 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 is so self-conscious of his “unmanly” mourning behavior makes it apparent how he might be also furious at his mother because of his stubborn grip on fictional gender expectations. Gertrude, as a woman, is not even in mourning for Old Hamlet herself, making her calm behavior manlier 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 so, Hamlet in his panic and fury seeks to restore the crumbling gender binary around him wherever he can, desperate to maintain the dichotomy and his identity as a respectable man. From Butler's perspective, disrupting harmful gender roles is a benefit to society, but Hamlet's insistence upon maintaining them makes him now not only society's victim, but an oppressor forcefully attempting to maintain a sexist world for his own reputation's benefit. If he cannot “outman” Gertrude when it comes to mourning, Hamlet feels he must find another way to perceive himself once more as a man and Gertrude as a woman so that he no longer feels weak and worthy of ridicule. 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 being seduced by 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), oppressively surveilling her gender much in the same way Claudius previously chided him. In Gertrude's sexual endeavors, Hamlet can still see an expectation of the gender binary he stubbornly refuses to let die: that women are 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 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 to himself 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. Unfortunately, this does not make him a hero for “saving” the gender fiction, but a tyrant for forcing its harmful implications to remain intact instead of allowing them to naturally deteriorate.

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 Gertrude’s and his own 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 behind the scenes (1.3 1-136), but from Hamlet's perspective, he only sees that she is a woman successfully taking 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 lose his romantic partner, 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-endangered masculinity. If the “ideal female” is mournful and submissive, Ophelia's assertiveness would only make Hamlet feel further disenfranchised as a man. “Troubling” gender, again, should be a positive thing, but here, Hamlet sees it as a threat victimizing him.

And just like with Gertrude, Hamlet reacts to this victimization not by combating the fictitious gender binary or freeing anyone from its pressures, but instead by becoming a repressive enforcer of them. He seeks to correct Ophelia’s disrespect of the gender binary by calling out the “female” identity and sexuality he can still see in place in her. Hamlet has no plot-related reason to shame Ophelia for the negative associations with her gender, but yet he feels the need to reassert her “place” in the binary, 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 goes on extensively

about the sinful and otherwise destructive “jig and amble” of women, pretending he comes out as the “wise man” who knows not to trust women like Ophelia. This aggressive description of socially-gendered behavior 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 masculinity again and earns him respect as a man after all, despite his earlier mourning. It also extends his bullying self-reassurances outside of his mother and onto a larger representation of women, so that he can further feel “manly” in comparison, even if it makes him a toxic barrier in the way of deconstructing harmful gender expectations.

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 characters who receive the bulk of Hamlet's verbal aggression. They are extensively called out for the way they behave as “women” simply because the binary-believing Hamlet wants to feel more like a man by comparison. It is the invented 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 all of us 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 and self-expression as equal.



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