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Does Hamlet Hate Women?

The women in Hamlet are depicted as the bearers of rage and insult from Hamlet, the namesake of William Shakespeare's famous play, which exposes his tragic obedience to filial duty and his emotional sensitivity. In order to fulfill his father's many commands, Hamlet denies himself the love of the two closest female characters: Gertrude, his mother, and Ophelia, the woman he loves. Actually, his mad cries about brothels, painted women, and nunneries reflect the outer shell of a man who, corrupted by a sense of duty towards his dead father, directs his anger towards women. If the old king's influence on Hamlet is discounted as his personal psychological state of mind, it can be argued that the apparent hatred for women that Hamlet shows throughout the play stems from his Oedipal disgust towards his irresolute, capricious mother.

Hamlet's expressive revulsion towards the two main characters is meant for Gertrude, but in turn, it is redirected at Ophelia as well. The first factor that triggers Hamlet's disgust for Gertrude is her disloyalty to his dead father. Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius, his uncle, when she is still grieving over her dead husband shocks Hamlet. Her decision brings hostility in his heart towards his mother but also arouses incestuous feelings, simply to usurp Claudius' wife as well as the kingdom. The mother-son emotions in the play show how Hamlet suffers due to his mother's follies, as if he is repenting for his mother's mistakes. However, even though the disgust that Hamlet feels towards his mother creates an ambiguity in his identity, his

hatred does not encompass only Gertrude, but surpasses her. Hamlet's inability to understand or name this anger makes his existence more complicated and muddles his actions. Nevertheless, Gertrude's character is so inconsequential that the reason for eliciting such a deep anger is unfathomable.

Hamlet's aversion of his mother's actions is expressed most insinuatingly in his beginning soliloquies. He expresses his dislike of his mother's explicit sexual appetite when he blames Gertrude for remarrying Claudius so soon after her husband died. His disgust over his mother's desire for sex is shown when he says, "But two months dead: nay, not so much, not two: ...As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on: and yet, within a month" (Shakespeare 1.2.142-149). Hamlet's anger is intensified because Gertrude could not even wait until the mourning period had passed to marry Claudius. This frivolity of Gertrude is one of the primary causes of Hamlet's anger, which he then extends to all women. Hence, he exclaims, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2.141-150). He believes that like Gertrude, all women are weak and irrational and that their judgement is blurred by their obsessive sexual desires.

Gertrude's marriage to Claudius incites further insults when Hamlet accuses her of removing herself from "my poor father's body" to "incestuous sheets" (Shakespeare 1.2.152). Hamlet's loathing of Gertrude only increases when he learns of her willful subjugation to the orders of the new king, flouting the will of his dead father. To Hamlet, this is an act of defilement that blurs the line of Gertrude's identity as his mother, as the queen to the late king, and as the queen to the new King Claudius. The main reason for the hatred that swarms Hamlet's heart is Gertrude's marriage "with my uncle" with the "most wicked speed" (Shakespeare 1.2.155-156). Indeed, his outrage towards his mother stems from his desire to look up to his

parents as ideal figures, wherein his father nurtures every wish of his loving wife: “So loving to my mother / That he might not beteem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly” (Shakespeare 1.2.144-146). This shows how Hamlet wishes his queen mother to be under the tutelage of his father’s symbolic rule. Hamlet’s desire for this perfect motherly image, contrasted with the reality of his mother’s actions, blinds him with rage. His distress at his mother’s supposedly overt sexuality, even on his father’s deathbed, compels him to throw verbal atrocities at her, depicting her as a source of both moral and sexual weakness.

Hamlet extends this rage that originates with his mother to all women including the one he loves, Ophelia. In act 2, scene 2, Hamlet is spurred on by his illusions of the eroding maternal goodness of Gertrude to question Ophelia’s intentions and her use of her female body. Hamlet extends his negative perception of women—caused by Gertrude’s perceived betrayal—to Ophelia, whom he designates as “gold kissing carrion” who breeds worms (Shakespeare 2.2.197). This image of a worm-breeding female body is an abject description of femininity as moral decay. In act 3, scene 1, Hamlet again expresses his disgust of motherhood and the female body by saying, “Get thee to a nunnery” (Shakespeare 3.1.99). Thus, Hamlet’s idea of women, due to his internalized hatred of his mother, fuses the female identity as one that is infested with immoral vices. However, in act 5, scene 1, Hamlet confesses his love for Ophelia: “I loved Ophelia. / Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum” (Shakespeare 5.1.47-49). Although the hatred that Hamlet feels towards Gertrude is initially directed towards Ophelia too, this confession shows that he may not hate all women.

The play clearly shows that Hamlet hates his mother, but his hatred is so intense that he is unable to disassociate his mother from other women. This in turn

makes him judge all women, especially Ophelia, in the same manner as his mother. Initially, Hamlet feels that women are capricious malefactors who do not deserve man's love and nurturing. The only emotion that befits a woman is abhorrence, which is in fact the emotion that Hamlet shows towards these two female characters for most of the play. However, his final confession of love in act 5 shows that though he hates Gertrude for her actions, he does not actually hate all women.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Barron's Education Series, 2007.