

# ADDITIONAL PUBLICATIONS

## *Hamlet's Battle with Patriarchal Gender Identity*

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## Hamlet's Battle with Patriarchal Gender Identity

In *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* written by William Shakespeare, Prince Hamlet of Denmark grieves over the death of his father and the hasty remarriage of his mother, Queen Gertrude, to his uncle, Claudius. A ghost of King Hamlet appears to Prince Hamlet, revealing to him that Claudius, who now holds the throne, murdered the late king, starting Hamlet on his path of revenge that eventually leads to his own demise. Throughout the play, Hamlet shows characteristics that, in a society dominated by masculine culture, are commonly associated as both male and female traits. Because of these traditional yet stereotypical views of gendered attributes, Hamlet's masculinity is questioned when he shows a reliance on emotion and passivity, and consequently he harshly compares himself to dominant men and projects his insecurities onto the women he loves. Hamlet's character shows the adverse effects of battling a deeply rooted patriarchal concept of gender identity, and how this can lead to self-renunciation and contribute to a loss of the will to live.

When Hamlet is first introduced during the King's address on his new marriage to the Queen, Hamlet's character is visibly grieving and cannot accept the changes that have occurred in his life. Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, notices his behavior and urges him to "cast thy nighted color off" (*Ham.* 1.2.68), and encourages him to let go of his father, as "All that lives must die,/ Passing through nature to eternity" (*Ham.* 1.2.72-3). Hamlet's display of emotion is criticized by his mother, as he cannot understand death as a natural process of life nor believe that his mother's happiness did not die with his father. While Hamlet's dissatisfaction with his mother's remarriage is consistent with the times, as "demographic evidence shows that widows rarely remarried" (Carlton 119) in the 16th century, Hamlet's reaction is taken by his mother as an overreaction. Not only is Hamlet criticized by a female for his own emotional display, but also by his uncle Claudius. Claudius uses Hamlet's emotional reliance to his own advantage, attempting to appeal to Hamlet's emotions by shaming him out of his grief, claiming "'Tis unmanly

grief" (*Ham.* 1.2.94). This is the first instance in which Hamlet's femininity is directly addressed, setting the precedent for the remainder of the play.

In Gertrude's and Claudius' reactions to Hamlet's outward grieving, the audience is shown the patriarchal concept of gender identity that Hamlet is expected to confine himself to. To make matters worse, his masculinity is questioned in the presence of a crowd, and of his political rival Fortinbras, who is hailed as an ideal of masculinity. This intensifies Hamlet's insecurities and contributes to his desire to die, which he proclaims minutes after his humiliation: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew" (*Ham.* 1.2.129-30). Hamlet's self-awareness of his femininity impacts his actions throughout the play, leading him to constantly battle between action and inaction.

Because of Hamlet's public accusation of being unmanly, he begins to become increasingly bothered by his femininity. In an attempt to scold Claudius, Hamlet claims that Claudius is "no more like [his] father/ Than [he] to Hercules" (*Ham.* 1.2.152-3). Hamlet is using this comparison to show that his uncle Claudius is significantly unlike his father, but in turn, Hamlet is claiming that he himself is unlike Hercules. Hercules is seen to be the most masculine hero in Greek mythology, creating a binary opposition between this ideal of masculinity and himself. In doing so, Hamlet is ingraining the idea into his own mind that he is unlike conventionally heroic men, which comes up later in the play when he contrasts himself to the courageous Fortinbras.

As De-yan says, "Hamlet who has an idealistic vision of man and a meditative temperament is ashamed of the dearth of masculinity in his character, especially when compared with other men around him" (94). Because of this constant battle of insecurity that Hamlet faces, he feels threatened by his differences from Fortinbras. Hamlet meets with Fortinbras' Norwegian army and discovers that Fortinbras is militarily defending "a little patch of ground" (*Ham.* 4.4.18) that is small and worthless. Hamlet, who has a more justified cause for action, is meanwhile battling the idea of killing in revenge of his father. Because of Hamlet's difference in tactics, he feels insecure and

ashamed of his passivity, as he has done less to avenge his father as Fortinbras is doing to defend land. However, Hamlet's insecurity is unnecessary, as his characteristics of love and kindness, which are shown by his hesitation to take action to kill, are what contribute to his popularity among the people of Denmark, showing the extent to which the masculine-dominated culture Hamlet grew up in affected him psychologically. Hamlet, however, does not acknowledge this and feels he must eliminate his femininity.

Hamlet's contempt with his own feminine characteristics causes him to attempt to drive out his femininity to build up his masculinity. Hamlet "assigns many contemptuous terms to women, such as 'whore,' 'drab,' 'strumpet,' 'bawd,' 'harlot,' etc. What underlies this gender hatred is a revelation of his self-negation and self-hatred" (De-yan 94). Because of Hamlet's animosity towards the feminine passivity in himself, he projects his own animosity onto women. This is best seen in Hamlet's chastising behavior towards Ophelia, and his admonition of his own mother.

While Adams argues that Hamlet's behavior toward Ophelia when she attempts to return the gifts he gave to her may be caused by "his anxiety to secure Ophelia from Claudius" (2), and may show that "he was concerned for her safety, [giving] a unity to the love story in the play, and [rendering] Hamlet's character infinitely more beautiful" (2), it is also a projection of his own battle against the femininity within himself, even if unintentionally. His misogynous suggestion that Ophelia join a nunnery exemplifies his need to proclaim himself as a dominant male, and externally shows his internal struggle against femininity. Hamlet's tendency to use abrasive dialogue when addressing the women he loves shows his lack of control when it comes to dealing with his internal insecurities, as he was never taught to deal with emotion but rather fight it and hide it away. Hamlet's treatment of his mother also shows his lack of ability to deal with his own femininity, as he tries to distinguish himself from his mother:

“Gertrude: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

Hamlet: mother, you have my father much offended.

Gertrude: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.” (3.4.8-11)

Hamlet’s insistence to take what Gertrude uses against him and make her seem worse shows his attempt to distance himself from femininity and show his superiority to it. Hamlet does not wish to harm the women in his life, but rather fight the femininity in them that he sees as a reflection of himself. “Hamlet is fully aware of these defects in his character and hates himself for that. So many times he degrades himself to be “an ass,” “a beast,” “a rogue,” “a slave,” “a villain,” and “a coward” (De-yan 94), causing him to act out against the traits that he sees in others that he hates in himself.

Throughout *Hamlet*, Prince Hamlet is faced with battling a deeply-rooted patriarchal concept of gender identity, as he exhibits traits culturally identified as both male and female and struggles to accept himself for the way he is. Because of society’s tendency to define characteristics as strictly male or female, Hamlet is forced to debate his feminine characteristics, such as the presence of emotion and passivity, in favor of pursuing masculinity. Had Hamlet been more equipped to recognize his traits as being non-binary, his actions would have vastly differed and perhaps the play would have had an alternate ending.

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