

Hamlet's Femininity

LA FÉMINITÉ DE HAMLET

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Abstract: The charm of *Hamlet* over the centuries largely lies in Shakespeare's subtle treatment of Hamlet, and many critics have interpreted Hamlet's tragedy as a result of his indecisive character, his obsession with philosophical thinking or his Oedipus Complex. This essay holds that Hamlet's struggle with his femininity also contributes to his tragedy. Hamlet does exhibit some masculine traits such as courage, rationality and aggressiveness, but at the same time he is agonized to find that he is as weak, emotional, passive and dependent as a woman. In whatever cases he is placed either as a prince, a son or a lover, he is more identified with women than with men. Such a discovery tortures him and produces in him some sense of self-negation and self-hatred. Because of his deep-rooted patriarchal concept of gender identity, Hamlet cannot make a compromise with the feminine traits in him, and it somewhat prevents him from taking a masculine action to avenge his father.

Key words: Hamlet; Femininity; Masculinity; Tragedy; Self-Hatred

Résumé: Depuis des siècles, le charme d'Hamlet se trouve largement dans un traitement subtil de Shakespeare de ce personnage et de nombreuses critiques ont interprété la tragédie d'Hamlet en raison de son caractère indécis, son obsession par la pensée philosophique ou son complexe d'Édipe. Cet essai soutient le point de vue que la lutte d'Hamlet contre sa féminité contribue également à sa tragédie. Hamlet montre certains traits masculins tels que le courage, la rationalité et l'agressivité, mais en même temps il est angoissé de voir qu'il est aussi faible, émotionnel, passif et dépendant comme une femme. Dans quelque cas, il n'est plus traité en tant qu'un prince, un fils ou un amant, il est plus identifié avec les femmes qu'avec les hommes. Une telle découverte le torture et produit chez lui un sentiment d'auto-négation et de haine de soi. En raison de son concept patriarcal profondément enraciné de l'identité de genre, Hamlet ne peut pas faire un compromis avec ses traits féminins, ce qui l'empêche de prendre une action virile pour venger son père.

Mots-Clés: Hamlet; féminité; masculinité; tragédie; haine de soi

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INTRODUCTION

During the last 400 years, *Hamlet* has become one of the greatest plays the world has seen. It is no exaggeration to say that its wide and enormous popularity among the audience, the readers and the critics has never been exceeded by any other single work. The universal charm of *Hamlet* lies in Shakespeare's exquisite poetic language, witty remarks about human foibles, delicate representation of Hamlet's dilemma and more importantly his keen perception of the essence of human life. Critical works on *Hamlet* can make up a library, among which Hamlet's character has been a favored topic for discussion. People are used to labeling fellow beings as either good or bad, but this play portrays a group of round characters who have shown their individual complexity to a more or less extent. Even the most vicious Claudius has something in him that we cannot hate: his constant love for Gertrude and his repentance for his crime. In terms of characterization, *Hamlet* offers a realistic representation of human beings as a combination of good and evil, as Adam in the Garden of Eden, who commits the sin of disobeying God's will, but shows great power of love in sinning together with Eve. Similarly, Hamlet's complex character makes it difficult for the readers to place him in either group. He is noble or cruel, innocent or guilty, meditative or impulsive, fearless or timid; he could be both or either of them, depending on the readers' understanding of his situation. More than that, Hamlet is also a combination of masculinity and femininity, which somewhat accounts for his hesitation in the act of avenging his father.

It has been generally believed that males stand as opposed to females physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Man is supposed to be strong, courageous, rational and sexually aggressive; while woman is weak, timid, emotional, and sexually passive. In *Hamlet*, there are not only obvious masculine traits but also feminine ones. In other words, Hamlet is a case of what Carl Jung says about human beings that anima (female elements) exists in man, just as animus (male elements) exists in woman.

1. HAMLET'S MASCULINITY

The most distinguishing masculine trait in Hamlet is his courage. When the ghost of the late king makes its appearance at midnight, the soldiers on watch describe it as a "dreaded sight," even Horatio whom Hamlet appraises "as one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing"(III. ii. l 51) is taken by "fear and wonder." He trembles and looks pale in the eyes of Bernardo. However, Hamlet betrays no sign of fear when confronted with the ghost. Before the ghost speaks, Hamlet challenges it by saying:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape

That I will speak to thee. (III. iv. ll 40-5)

When the ghost beckons him to go to a more isolated place, he follows it despite the warnings of Horatio and Marcellus that the ghost might bewitch him so that he would fall off the cliff into the sea. Later when Laertes in sadness over the loss of both his father and sister defies Hamlet to compete in the art of fencing, Hamlet accepts it without hesitation though he knows clearly that Laertes is superb in this art. Even if he depreciates himself sometimes as a coward for not killing Claudius, Hamlet demonstrates his bravery in these two confrontations.

In the case of Hamlet, the postponement of killing has nothing to do with courage, but a result of his indulgence in philosophizing about the worlds of life and death, as he says in the famous monologue "to be or not to be":

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. (III. i. ll 84-9)

Traditional concepts on gender identity hold that a man is a creature of thinking, and a woman of feeling. The tragic flaw of Hamlet is his love of thinking. His mind is responsive to every occasion, relevant or irrelevant to him, from the death of his father, the overhasty marriage of his mother, to the concern about the rivalry between children's performing company and the adult actors, from the virtue of woman to the art of performance, from Claudius's revelry to the grave digging of the two clowns, Hamlet's mind never stops working. His remarks on life and human foibles stimulate the listeners to think further of their own situation, but it is just this habit of thinking that destroys his mind and will. When he articulates the ills of life, "the whips and scorns of time / Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely / The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay / The insolence of office, and the spurns / That patient merit of th'unworthy takes" (III. i. ll 71-5), he finds life painful and weary and comes to a pessimistic vision of life. Then the graveyard scene reinforces his pessimism and nihilism with the realization that big shots and humble men will all return to dust at the end of their life. What an irony it is if Alexander the Great turns out to become dust to be used to stop a beer barrel and Julius Caesar might "stop a hole to keep the wind away." If so, what is the meaning of life, the use of action? Such reasonings lead Hamlet to doubt about his own life and the necessity to avenge his father. Accordingly, he is caught in his philosophical meditations and makes it a pretext for his state of inactivity.

Another masculine trait, a vulgar one, is Hamlet's sexual aggressiveness. Though he does not assault Ophelia physically, he stains her orally and emotionally. Many of his words carry sexual connotations when he talks to Ophelia during the play of *Mousetrap*. Take the example of the following conversation:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Ophelia: No, my lord.

Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?

Ophelia: Ay, my lord.

Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

... ..

Ophelia: Will 'a tell us what this show meant?

Hamlet: Ay, or any show that you will show him. Be not you ashamed to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means.

Obviously, the phrases of "lie in your lap" "country matters" and "show" are a direct implication of Hamlet's sexual advances on Ophelia. Just due to his seduction, young and innocent Ophelia falls into his trap of love. There is a good reason to think that if Hamlet had not said those loving words and made oaths of love to her, Ophelia would have lived safely and happily with the care of her father and brother. But Hamlet taints Ophelia's mind and lures her to some sexual fancy as revealed in her lunatic song of love after she receives the dual attacks of her father's death and Hamlet's disappearance.

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,

And dugged the chamber door,
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more. (IV. V. ll 47-54)

In so far as Ophelia's tragedy is concerned, Hamlet's sexual aggressiveness makes him a killer.

2. HAMLET'S FEMININITY

In Hamlet, there are also some personality traits which are generally believed as belonging to women, such as his hesitation, evasion of princely duties and emotional dependence. As Elaine Showalter analyzes through the numerous castings of Hamlet on stage, Hamlet is often portrayed as a woman.

It is perhaps because Hamlet's emotional vulnerability can so readily be conceptualized as feminine that this is the only heroic male role in Shakespeare which has been regularly acted by women, in a tradition from Sarah Bernhardt to most recently, Diane Venora, in a production directed by Joseph Papp. (223)

2.1 Hamlet's femininity as a prince

As the only prince of Denmark and the successor to the crown, Hamlet is expected to shoulder the duties of leading and defending his country and of redressing the ills of the society. However, when Denmark is plunged in a sea of troubles, Hamlet chooses to stay away. Outside, Norwegian prince Fortinbras is training his troops for an attack on Denmark; inside, the people and soldiers are suspicious of the sudden death of the old king and the immediate crowning of Claudius, as Marcellus observes, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I. iv. 190). Hamlet knows clearly that Denmark is in crisis and declares that "The time is out of joint" (I. v. 1197), but what he says next will disappoint his people, for a prince is not expected to have complained his duty as thus, "O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I. v. 1197-98) Instead of equipping his mind with resolution to redress the social ills and destroy any foreign invasion, Hamlet unfittingly questions Fate why this mission is placed on him. In this sense, Hamlet is really a coward, a deserter.

Public and national affairs do not interest Hamlet whose mind is devoted to private and family matters. Throughout the play, most of the time he is engrossed in the matter of his mother's remarriage and his own dilemma, only occasionally do his remarks touch upon the big issues concerning the state. The obsession with domestic matters is generally defined as effeminate, especially in a male-dominated society, and Hamlet thus becomes a woman by giving up his male domain.

The other side of the coin shows that it is due to his femininity that Hamlet maintains a tender heart toward his people. Unlike Fortinbras, Laertes and even the Greek hero Pyrrhus who are determined to avenge their fathers, Hamlet is never ready for the revenge since he cannot harden his heart to kill anyone, including his enemies. His humanistic and democratic concepts and his peace-loving mind win him the adoration of his friends and subjects. Hamlet's reputation as a kind prince prevents Claudius from taking actions against him for fear that the public would rise in defence of Hamlet. If in peaceful times, Hamlet would surely become a good king, but the femininity in him weakens his name as a prince when faced with internal chaos and external threats.

2.2 Hamlet's femininity as a child

30-year-old Hamlet sometimes acts as if he were a child. In words, he is a man of intellect, is a philosopher and a thinker. In deeds, however, he is dominated by feminine emotions. He is a mamma's boy.

Before his father's death, Hamlet had led a carefree life. He was bathed in the love of his mother who "lives almost by his looks" and the flattery of the councilors. He was not troubled by national affairs as they were taken care of by his father who was still in good physical condition. What he did was merely to

enjoy what he had and to receive his princely education. Growing up in such an environment, he naturally develops a dependent character, emotionally dependent on his mother, intellectually on his father. However, the unexpected death of his father and the remarriage of his mother shatter his beautiful world of balance and felicity. Since then, the sun has never shone into Hamlet's heart. He covers himself up in the mourning cloak of black and wears an expression of grief all day long. He cannot accept the changes in his life, nor can he understand that death is a natural outcome of life and that his mother's happiness as a woman is not ended with the death of her husband. Since he cannot recall his father back to life, he then tortures his mother for having broken his world.

...Have you eyes?

Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed

And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?

... ..

...What devil was't

That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?

Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,

Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,

Or but a sickly part of one true sense

Could not so mope. O shame, where is thy blush? (III. iv. ll 66-82)

These bitter words sound like daggers in the ears of Gertrude who begins to examine her soul. At the same time, these words also lay bare the intensity of Hamlet's agitation over the loss of his world. When he loses his father, he hopes to keep his mother all to himself, an act interpreted as an expression of Oedipus Complex by Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones who see "Hamlet as a little Oedipus who cannot bring himself to kill Claudius because he stands in the place of his own desire, having murdered Hamlet's father and married his mother (qtd. in Rose 193). By whatever explanation, Hamlet's desire of possessing his mother's love is obviously a reflection of his child-like psyche because on similar occasions when a father dies, the son usually assumes the role of the head of household, giving care and concern to his mother, and such a rise and fall of life will train his mind and will so that he will grow to be a man. But Hamlet fails to become a man of independence, and is lost in his futile attempt to relive the past.

The father knows Hamlet's character of emotional dependence and vulnerability, but his unnatural death gives him no chance to train Hamlet in masculine strengths. Therefore, his ghost appears armed from head to toe, by which he seems to embolden Hamlet. On the one hand, he urges Hamlet to take revenge on Claudius; on the other hand, he seems to warn the prince of the impending war and of the duty he should take to restore stability to Denmark. Pitifully, Hamlet does not catch this second layer of meaning. He does not trouble himself at all with the task of defending his country. As before, he still pins his mind on his mother and his personal loss of his world of balance and dependence.

2.3 Hamlet's femininity as a lover

As soon as Polonius and Laertes learn of Hamlet's affection for Ophelia, they forbid her to develop her relation with him. Both the father and brother see that her love will be futile, for Hamlet's choice of love must be "circumscribed onto the voice and yielding of that body whereof he is the head" (I. iii. ll24-5). At the same time they both doubt about Hamlet's love and feel that Hamlet would not be a good lover. What Hamlet does later justifies their judgment on him.

To say fairly, Hamlet is not a libertine though his words are somewhat vulgar in some cases. He does love Ophelia and vows to be faithful to her, as he confesses at the funeral of Ophelia, "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum"(V. i. ll 223-25). The problem is that his love is a doom to Ophelia, because he does not know how to love her as a man should do.

A man in love not only adores his beloved, but also protects her and offers her the sense of security. Hamlet adores Ophelia's beauty and purity, but he cannot perform the role of a protector since he himself is like a girl, needing a lover's care. As mentioned earlier on, Hamlet has been living with the tender care of his parents as a mamma's boy, and his life has been one of taking but not giving; as a result, he has no idea how to love others.

Hamlet needs his mother's love, his father's protection, his friends' fidelity, his subjects' admiration and his lover's adoration and devotion. In return he gives nothing to them. He chides his mother's hasty remarriage without mercy, ignores his father's order, sends his two childhood friends to death, shows no concern about the destiny of his country, and most unforgivably he indirectly causes Ophelia's death. To Hamlet, what others need and hope for go next to his own needs. That decides how he treats Ophelia. Despite his passionate declaration of love, he makes use of Ophelia, through whom he makes people believe that he has gone insane. Later, when he speaks those vulgar words to realize verbally his own sexual fancy, he never thinks about their effect on innocent Ophelia. So what Hamlet does to Ophelia disqualifies him as a man-lover.

3. HAMLET'S HATRED OF HIS FEMININITY

To the two women most important in his life, Hamlet does not give them whole-hearted love and protection; instead he denounces and tortures them. He says sharply of his mother's disloyalty and loathes the fact that he is born out of her body. He distresses Ophelia when he suddenly changes his daring assertion "I did love you once" to the cruel denial "I loved you not." More than that, he 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. In other words, he hates the feminine traits in his character, as Elaine Showalter puts it, "Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent revulsion against women and into his brutal behavior toward Ophelia" (222).

In a society dominated by masculine culture, manly virtues are adored; femininity in man is repudiated. 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. His father performed heroic deeds while alive; even in his ghostly form, he still walks martially in his armor. Young Fortinbras, Laertes and Greek hero Pyrrhus all have a father to avenge, and all are ready for action. In contrast, Hamlet who has a more justified cause than Fortinbras and Laertes whose fathers deserve their deaths more or less is all the time mentally wrestling with the idea of killing. He even feels inferior to his friend Horatio whose maturity and sobriety are a foil to his childishness and impetuosity. While he sees his difference in these heroic men, he is agonized to discover his affinity with women. Gertrude and Ophelia become a mirror of Hamlet's image. In Gertrude, he sees his frailty and in Ophelia, he sees his passivity. 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." In one of the monologues he makes after listening to the player's reciting of Priam's slaughter, he voices both his self-hatred and his hatred of women.

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion! Fie upon't, foh! About, my brains! (III. i. ll 510-15)

In order to build up his masculine image, Hamlet tries to drive out those feminine traits, as seen in his endeavor to repress the tears when he is impatient with the ghost of his father. "Do not look upon me / Lest with this piteous action you convert / My stern effects. Then what I have to do / Will want true color---tears perchance for blood" (III. iv. ll 131-34). Besides Hamlet who manages to bottle up his

feminine emotions, Laertes also does his best to kill the femininity in him. Upon learning of Ophelia's death, Laertes is despaired, but without tears.

Too much of water has thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet
It is our trick; nature her custom holds.
Let shame say what it will. [He weeps.] When these are gone,
The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord.
I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,
But that this folly douts it. (IV. Vii. ll185-89)

Both Hamlet and Laertes here attribute tears to effeminate expression of sorrow. As Showalter argues that "water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid, and milk" (225). Hamlet and Laertes both believe that by keeping back tears, they will stand as real men.

CONCLUSION

Hamlet's tragedy is not merely a result of his excessive thinking, but also his reluctance to be reconciled with the femininity in him. He does show some of masculine traits, but his too idealistic and contemplative temperament all the time direct him to compare himself with other men, but only to discover his identification with women. He naively adores the masculinity in his father, Fortinbras, Laertes and Horatio, believing that masculinity is what a man should all possess and femininity is something a man should be ashamed of. As a matter of fact, feminine and masculine traits (anima and animus in Carl Jung's terms) coexist in everyone only that in some men their masculine aspects prevail and their feminine aspects tend to be ignored. The biblical myth of human creation also confirms the concept of man and woman being united in one. When God takes one rib out of Adam to make Eve, both male and female traits have been embedded in them. There is Eve in Adam and there is Adam in Eve. So a man does not need to be troubled by his anima, and a woman has no need to boast of her animus. A most reasonable judgment of one's gender identity is to acknowledge and come to terms with his or her anima and animus, like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* who can well combine the two sides of her character and finally win the adoration and affection of Bassanio.

If Hamlet's mind had not been corrupted by the patriarchal concept of woman as being an inferior gender, and if he could have broken the opposition of masculinity and femininity, he might not have been tortured too much by the feminine traits in him, and he might have been really ready for action.

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