Narayan Sundararajan

Dr. Wilson

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Hamlet and the New Misogyny

If there is any series of relationships Shakespeare's Hamlet has that is more convoluted or perplexing than any other, it is those he has with women. Sometimes, he seems sappily enamored with his feminine counterparts; others, he is in a wild and cruel rage, exclaiming in one of the most famous lines of the play, "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.121), to a hurt and confused Ophelia. More contradictions reveal this confusion – he sighs, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2.146) at one moment, yet he laments at the loss of Ophelia, stating that he would "be buried quick with her" (5.1.269). The peak of these complicated conversations arises immediately after Hamlet's murder of Polonius, where, in what is by far the longest tirade against a woman in the play, Hamlet berates Gertrude's supposed loss of virtue, while almost commanding her to rid herself of any vice (3.4.41-94). Clearly, the confusing nature of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* extends even to the basest of relations.

The unavoidable conclusion would suggest that Hamlet is misogynistic, a term that the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "[a] dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women". To a certain extent, this is true, for Hamlet does display deep-seated chauvinistic intolerances. Indeed, the aforementioned definition is how society currently views misogyny, and its very definition suggests a monolithic interpretation of a nebulous concept.

Yet, a close analysis reveals that the accepted definition of misogyny does not extend to all of Hamlet's actions and beliefs. Shakespeare's inclusion of Hamlet's irrational and self

contradicting tendencies when speaking to women challenges the typical definition of misogyny, and instead construes it into one that seeks simultaneously to defend and, through this defense, to impugn women's behavior. Misogyny in this work therefore does not imply an inherent hatred of women, but instead implies a desire to control conduct that fosters what society typically considers to be misogyny. If we accept this premise, we see Hamlet in a different light, now as a prince frustrated by the "corrupt" tendencies of the female gender, who uses misogynistic tactics to push his concept of morality and virtue on those present.

Religion plays a fundamental role in *Hamlet*, and nearly every character in the play succumbs to its tenants. Even from the outset, King Claudius uses the words of religious authority to console Hamlet, stating: "It [Hamlet's grief] shows a will most incorrect to heaven…Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature" (1.2.95-102). Hamlet employs this same terminology to great effect in his tirade against Gertrude. He decries Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, with: "Heaven's face does glow, / O'er this solidity and compound mass, / With heated visage, as against the doom, / Is thought-sick at the act (3.4.45-50). Hamlet uses this religious fervor even to compare Gertrude's former marriage to Old Hamlet, recalling the Greek pantheon as he calls his father Hyperion, Jove, Mars, and Mercury (3.4.56-58). Through this comparison, Hamlet not only echoes the religious undertones present throughout play, but presents himself as someone who actively and aggressively throws his beliefs on others. If there are those who do not agree with said belief, Hamlet ominously calls upon Judgment Day to warn of their inherent sin (3.4.70). Religion at its core is a series of moral precepts to be followed, and from this conception of morality, one can create a definition of virtue. Hamlet adheres well to this concept of religious morality. When debating whether or not to kill Claudius, Hamlet resolves, "[Am I] to take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit

and season'd for his passage?" (3.4.88-90), deciding that it would be better to kill Claudius when he is less virtuous.

Hamlet's definition of virtue relies primarily on the assumption of no sin both before and after marriage. By creating this definition of virtue, it makes sense therefore to see why Hamlet is frustrated with the actions of those around him; they, whether it be Gertrude or Ophelia, do not adhere to his ideal standards of morality. In Hamlet's eyes, Ophelia must be flaunting her femininity and seductive nature when he reads his book alone in Act III, and Gertrude cavorts in "incestuous sheets" (1.2.157), an inherently sinful act that defies the will of God. But while it is interesting to note that Hamlet deeply adheres to moral precepts, it is intriguing that he pushes his moral precepts almost exclusively on Gertrude and Ophelia. In fact, whenever Hamlet decries the sinfulness or moral ineptitudes of specific characters, he does it only to women and combines it with a religiously inclined diatribe. He chastises Gertrude, stating, "Such an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love" (3.4.41-44), implying that the virtue and chastity she once displayed has now been lost as a result of her actions. Hamlet goes on, asking her if she has been corrupted, with "What devil was't / That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?" (3.4.76-77), implying that she has succumbed to moral vices.

Hamlet's behavior, however, is not a result of a deep-seated desire to degrade because he views them as an inferior class; rather, it is a manifestation of his need to control, police, and save the behavior of those he considers degenerates – in this case, women. By comparing his father to the Greek gods (3.4.56-58) and his uncle to a "mildewed ear" (3.4.64), Hamlet is therefore inherently suggesting to Gertrude that she is now married to someone below her, who is someone more "mortal". Old Hamlet was a god, and she was chaste before because of that, but

now she has succumbed to mortal vices. Hamlet exclaims further "Do you have eyes!" (3.4.67) to Gertrude, implying that she cannot see the damage and degradation she has caused to herself. It is therefore the duty of Hamlet, as a chaste and pious man, to save "unseeing" women from themselves lest they risk damnation. Through this reasoning, the infamous "get thee to a nunnery" polemic Hamlet gives to Ophelia is not a cruel remark meant to hurt, but instead a plea for her to literally get herself to a nunnery, so that she can be purer and turned into a more "godly" path. While still patronizing in nature, we find that Hamlet's desire to protect stems from an inherent doubt regarding the moral nature of women.

The angry, protective behavior Hamlet displays in his interactions could be seen as purely aggressive, and as a manifestation of the supposed insanity he displays consistently. To an extent, this is true – when arguing with Gertrude and Ophelia, he does not use the typical reasoned rhetoric he displays in his soliloquies and interactions with men. Instead, he is overly emotional, and uses the same similes and analogies repeatedly. When speaking to Gertrude, Hamlet drives home the point of religious morality, and frequently interrupts even himself. We see the same happenings in the "get thee to a nunnery speech – the same phrase is repeated thrice in various formats (3.1.121-140), in a manner most unlike Hamlet's reasoned philosophical leanings. But while our titular character displays these hurtful tendencies in situations where he deliberately attempts to be insane (for example, Hamlet only is critical against Ophelia after he realizes that Claudius and Polonius are watching him, with "Where's your father?" (3.1.130)), one can garner that behind these words there is an undercurrent of concern – even well-intentioned concern - and a desire for these women to be safe. The speech Hamlet gives to Gertrude is unreasoned, with the same basic point – that Gertrude is not chaste – repeated over and over, but it is emotional and so long for the simple reason that Hamlet cares for Gertrude's

well being. And while he does berate Ophelia, one can clearly see that he loved her once and still – we see that he used to write her passionate letters, stating, "I have not / art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O / most best, believe it." (2.2.120-122). Later, he laments her death, crying, "Be buried quick with her, and so will I" (5.1.269). Hamlet's aggressive statements are therefore not meant purely to criticize, but are a loving, if ill-mannered, way to protect them from themselves. He loves them so much that he must criticize them to ensure their virtue is unspoiled.

Traditionalists would argue that misogyny in its inherent form arises as a result of ingrained and deep-seated prejudices against women. Love in any format is not included in this definition, as it is contrary to this belief, for it would not make sense through this reasoning to suppose that one would have the capacity to love while still engaging in aggressive and cruel behavior. However, an expanded definition of what it means to be misogynistic, and the roots of this misogyny, can be seen through a new critical reading of *Hamlet*. Prince Hamlet's consistent policing behavior is misogynistic, yes, but this misogyny stems from love. The paternalistic tendencies Hamlet displays are not hateful inherently, but manifest themselves in that way due to a misguided need to control women's virtue.

We can therefore postulate a new definition of misogyny using *Hamlet* as one that not only seeks to subjugate women through misguided critiques, but also seeks to repress women based on a fundamental need to love, and therefore control. We find that the reading of *Hamlet* presented above, and Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet himself, give us two distinct types of misogyny: "villainous" misogyny, wherein an inherent hatred of women provides the drive to subjugate, and "heroic" misogyny, where doubt as to a woman's strength leads to patronizing behavior coming from a need to "save" the woman from herself. These two definitions now

expand and redefine what it means to be misogynistic – the term now not only applies to instances of pure hatred, but applies to Hamlet's actions as well.

Yet while Hamlet's interactions are interesting within the confines of the play, the implications Shakespeare presents us with regarding systems of societal oppression are all the more intriguing. Beyond the text, one finds that recent events that society would normally not consider to be misogynistic in nature, do, in fact, adhere to that principle. When the Taliban imposes draconian restrictions on the fundamental rights of women, they adhere to the "villainous misogynistic principle". Yet when male politicians remark on certain rights women can or cannot obtain, they invoke the "heroic misogynistic principle", more often than not stating that they must protect a woman's virtue, based on their assumptions on morality and what it means to be a "proper" member of society. While the latter, "heroic" misogyny could be considered by some to be "less" harmful than the former, the point still remains: misogyny exists in varied forms, and there is no hierarchy of misogyny that would make some tendencies less misogynistic than another, for any misguided belief is the same – a misguided belief. Perhaps this is the meaning behind Shakespeare's inclusion of Hamlet's interactions; to provide the modern reader with a new way of analyzing our world's gender norms.

Works Cited

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