

The Tragedy of Sexuality in *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT

A consistently progressive view of the complex determination of factors accounting for Hamlet's overwhelming engagement in visionary destiny has been greatly undermined in the criticism of this play by a prominent opinion which has stressed Hamlet's revulsion at his mother's sexuality as the exclusive, fundamental motivation in Hamlet's experience. Such an opinion rests strongly on a reading of Hamlet's emotions about his mother's marriage in his first soliloquy, which has been taken to express Hamlet's fundamental melancholic disgust, emotions before whose intensity, indeed, the revelation of the murder and the sense of horror it inspires have been felt to be secondary and superfluous. As a matter of fact, what is more properly described as Hamlet's outraged despair over his mother's marriage constitutes at the point of Hamlet's first soliloquy an entirely new emphasis in Hamlet's grief, for until then Hamlet's grief over his father's loss, and to the sorry state of affairs to which the 'world' has come since the death of his father. This paper tries to show the account of Hamlet's feelings that pervade in the whole play.

The number of male characters in Shakespeare's plays far outnumbers the number of female characters. This may be due to the fact that women were not allowed to be actors in Shakespeare's time, so all the women characters had to be played by men. Regardless of the reason, it seems that when Shakespeare creates a female character, she must be important to the plot in some way. Shakespeare created Gertrude, Hamlet's mother and a symbol of female sexuality, for Hamlet. Gertrude's presence is important in that sense that it seems to initiate the tragedy in Denmark.

One of only two women in the play, *Hamlet*, Gertrude's character is not fully developed. We are left to ask many questions: Did she have an adulterous relationship with Claudius before King Hamlet was killed? Did she help Claudius murder King Hamlet? Did she even know anything about the murder? Does it matter? These and many other questions arise from the ambiguity of her character.

Gertrude is not seen as an individual. Janet Adelman, in the book, *Suffocating Mothers*, points out that, "Whatever individuality she might have had is sacrificed to her status as mother" (34). I would say that her individuality is also sacrificed to her status as a wife and queen.

Even though she is not an individual, one could say that the tragedy in the play, *Hamlet*, falls on

Gertrude's shoulders. According to Carolyn Heilbrun, in her book *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*, Gertrude is seen as weak and lacking depth, but she is essential to the play. "...Gertrude [is] vital to the action of the play; not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off," occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost" (9).

Heilbrun describes Gertrude as "passion's slave" (17). "Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded, vacillating woman [some people] fail to see Gertrude for the strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and apart from this passion, sensible woman that she is" (Heilbrun 11). Whether one sees her as the frail woman that follows the whims of the men in her life or as the strong woman that knows exactly what she is doing, Gertrude's sexuality is at the heart of this tragedy. "The 'something' rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90) leads directly ... to the degraded sexuality in which Gertrude is trapped" (Erickson 73).

As I see it, Gertrude's sexuality leads to the downfall of this court in two ways. First, Claudius murders the King in order to marry a sexual woman and through her gain access to

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the throne. Although we hear Claudius confess through prayer that he did kill the king later in the play, we first hear of the murder and motive from the ghost. "Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast, / With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts – / O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power / so to seduce!" (1.5.42-45). In other words, Claudius used his power to seduce Gertrude in order to take the throne.

The second way that Gertrude's sexuality leads to the downfall of this court is that her seemingly adulterous and incestuous relationship with Claudius and her quick marriage plague Hamlet throughout the play. He cannot identify with his father because he now links his father with his sexual mother. With this link in mind, he does not want to link himself with his sexual mother.

The most telling scene of how Hamlet feels about his mother and her sexuality is generally what is referred to as the closet scene, Act 3, scene 4. Hamlet has been summoned by the Queen. He goes to her room, or closet, where she waits with Polonius listening behind the arras. The Queen intends to reprimand Hamlet for his mad behavior and the offensive dialogue that he wrote for the players. Hamlet intends to make his mother see the error she has made in marrying Claudius. Gertrude says, "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended." Hamlet answers with his true feeling by saying, "Mother, you have my father much offended" (3.4.9-10). Hamlet tells the queen that she is being too sexual for her age. He also shows his repulsion of her choice of Claudius over his virtuous father.

The tragedy partly comes out of Hamlet's procrastination over killing Claudius. He does this partly because he is obsessed with his mother's sexuality and her new marriage. So when it is said that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90), some would agree that the "something" is Gertrude.

Gertrude provides the maternal presence in Hamlet. She embodies the sexuality that creates this tragedy. As Adelman says, "In the histories, maternal absence functions to enable the son's assumption of his father's identity... (13). The absence of fully female sexuality is ... what enables the holiday tone of these plays [the comedies]; that sexuality is for Shakespeare the stuff of tragedy..." (14). Gertrude knows from the start that her marriage is what is causing Hamlet's madness. She says, "I doubt it is no other but the main – / His father's death and our

o'er hasty marriage (2.256-57). "This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous. It is not the statement of a dull, slothful woman who can only echo her husband's words" (Heilbrun 12). With this statement Gertrude tells the audience that this tragedy comes from her actions. She confirms that it is her presence that ignites the tragedy that occurs in Denmark.

In Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*, it is possible for the audience or reader to come to view Ophelia as an innocent victim trapped in the most tragic circumstances. She was an obedient and loving daughter to her father Polonius. Ophelia obeyed him, when he ordered her to stop seeing Hamlet, her love, and even when she was asked to betray her love, acting as a decoy to allow the King and Polonius to discover the source of Hamlet's grief. Her naive nature is evident in this love that she has for Hamlet, even though he promised to marry her, took her virginity, mistreated her, and finally left her. Her young age and motherless upbringing left Ophelia completely unprepared for a crisis like the death of her father and the insanity of Hamlet.

However, it is possible to interpret Ophelia's eventual insanity as a result of her guilt and involvement in her own sexual rebellion. In the 1996 movie version of *Hamlet*, directed by Kenneth Branagh, Ophelia, played by Kate Winslet, is not portrayed as the entirely innocent girl one expects. During the course of the movie, the viewer can watch Ophelia evolve from the young innocent girl to a sexual woman, and then, finally, a woman stricken with grief and insanity. The most poignant example of this metamorphosis appears in Act IV, Scene V of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It takes place long after Ophelia is set up by the King and Polonius to act as a pawn in their attempt to discover the reason for Hamlet's insanity. Also prior to Act IV, Scene V, Hamlet gives the famous "Get thee to a nunnery" speech, leaving a frightened Ophelia. This scene is also the first time we see Ophelia after the accidental murder of her father by Hamlet.

Finally, Ophelia exits into a padded room to stare at the wall, alone. The new interpretation of Ophelia provided by Kate Winslet's performance allows the viewer to perceive her in a new light. The flowers she gives actually come to almost symbolize her deflowered maidenhead. She is deflowering herself in a sense, because she cannot give anymore of

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herself to anyone. This lack of purity and innocence eventually leads Ophelia to commit suicide. She fell into remorse because she had lost her virginity by her own actions, her love, and her father. She could not live with these feelings of regret and guilt. Thus, she committed suicide to end the pain and grief, brought on by her own actions. Ophelia is not an innocent victim. Her sexual desires involved her in the life of Hamlet and lead her down a road, not to a nunnery, but to her eventual demise.

It is frequently argued that the women characters in *Hamlet* are drawn in fainter lines than their male counterparts. Interpreters of the work are therefore urged to sharpen their image through speculation. They feel obliged to produce answers to the seemingly unresolved questions that surround them: Was Gertrude having an affair with Claudius prior to her husband's murder? Was she a collaborator (conspirator) in that murder? Had Polonius commonly baited his traps with his own daughter? How deeply involved were Hamlet and Ophelia?

Did Hamlet love Ophelia? Despite his protestations for and against "I love thee not."... "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love. Make up my sum," possibly because of them, there was considerable speculation on both sides. Here are two examples of contradicting opinions from Victorian actresses writing at almost the same time.

I have even heard it denied that Hamlet did love Ophelia. The author of the finest remarks I have yet seen on the play and the character of Hamlet, leans to this opinion... I do think, with submission, that the love of Hamlet for Ophelia is deep, is real, and is precisely the kind of love which such a man as Hamlet would feel for such a woman as Ophelia (Jameson 161).

According to Martin (1888):

I cannot, therefore, think that Hamlet comes out well in his relations with Ophelia. I do not forget what he says at her grave: But I weigh his actions against his words, and find them here of little worth. The very language of his letter to Ophelia, which Polonius reads to the king and queen, has not the true ring in it. It comes from the head and not from the

heart - it is a string of euphemisms, which almost justifies Laertes' warning to his sister, that the "trifling of Hamlet's favour" is but "the perfume and suppliance of a minute." Hamlet loves, I have always felt, only in a dreamy, imaginative way, with a love as deep, perhaps, as can be known by a nature fuller of thought and contemplation than of sympathy and passion (Martin 19).

Needless to say, directors have to make some choices. They range from explicit to ambiguous. On the explicit side, Kenneth Branagh's 1997 film version of *Hamlet* includes cutaway shots of Hamlet and Ophelia making love. Tinted blue, these inserts hint at more than they reveal, hardly making the film a "blue" movie. Similarly, in Tony Richardson's 1969 production, Ophelia (Marianne Faithful) blurts out laughter at Laertes warning not to "lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open."

An interesting take on the relationship comes in Linda Bamber's *Comic Women, Tragic Men*. Bamber dismisses love as psychologically impossible for *Hamlet*. Of all of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Hamlet* is the one in which the sex nausea is most pervasive. The other heroes all have to be brought by the action of the play to that low moment when their pain is translated into misogyny; Hamlet compares his mother to a beast in his very first scene:

O God, a beast that wants a discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer...

O, most wicked speed to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
(I.ii.50-1, 156-7)

And from the first his encounters with Ophelia are spattered with hostility and disgust:

I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp; you nickname God' creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance (III.i.143-7).

In the closet scene with Gertrude, Hamlet's loathing comes to its climate.

...Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed

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Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty... (III.iv.92-95).

Furthermore, there is no reconciliation with women at the end of the play... Hamlet does throw himself into Ophelia's grave, but clearly this is more an act of aggression against Laertes than of reconciliation with the dead Ophelia (Bamber 71).

To sustain this viewpoint, Linda Bamber invents her own past for Hamlet.

The sex nausea is here, as in the other tragedies, a corollary to the hero's psychological and spiritual suffering. It is isomorphic not with the play as a whole but only with the second phase of the tragic fable. It is present from the beginning because *Hamlet* actually begins in the middle of the second phase. The first phase has ended with the death of Hamlet's father, two months prior to time present. That death has ended the old world, comfortably centered on the masculine Self and based on an identity of interests between father and son. In the new world the presence of the Other destroys the hero's sense of centrality. Misogyny is a version of the anger the hero directs toward the Other for destroying his old, self-centered world. Hamlet, like other heroes, rages against women when he loses his place in the sun (Bamber 72).

Bamber sees the women as a barometer of Hamlet's psychological state. When Hamlet is at ease with his destiny, the women cease being monstrous and lustful and become worthy and true.

According to Ms. Bamber, Hamlet's misogyny ceases at the point where he makes his voyage to England and arranges the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At this point, he overcomes his underlying doubt in his own manliness and emerges as "a man of action." "With this gesture of single-minded aggression against his enemies," she states, "Hamlet finally proves himself as a history hero" (84). Her theory is based on the notion that Hamlet transforms his sexual aggression against women who have withdrawn from him into the more appropriate channel of political aggression. With this change, the sexuality of the play moves from "violent and disgusted" to "clear and elegiac," and Ophelia emerges as "an icon

of positive femininity" (72). "The sexuality of the final movement is natural first of all, in that Ophelia's femininity is defined by its association with natural things - with flowers that she gives away, hangs on the willow tree, and has thrown on her grave. Ophelia becomes a kind of inverse Perdita, a pathetic May Queen" (72-3).

In any case, the likelihood of a relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia seems to depend on two things that are beyond Ophelia's control, and possibly even the control of Hamlet. The first is Hamlet's psychological state. The second is the political exigencies of the drama. For Ophelia, this means that any willfulness she might bring to the relationship is overridden by her father's and brother's demands. She becomes bait in a trap (springs to catch woodcocks), and in the process is trapped herself.

It is often stated that Ophelia, with her willow tree and her flowers serves at a representative of the natural world within the artificial construct of the court at Elsinore. If this is the case, it is also true that she is no longer capable of what is most natural within this environment. Just as Gertrude is kept from the natural process of mourning, Ophelia's love is muted and repressed by forces that overwhelm her. In his soliloquy, Hamlet shows his feelings:

That it should come to this!

But two months dead! Nay, not so much, not two.

So excellent a king that was to this

Hyperion to a satyr: so loving to my mother,

That he might not between the winds of heaven

Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!

Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on: and, yet, within a month—

Let me not think on't. FRAILTY, THY NAME IS WOMAN!—a LITTLE MONTH, OR ERE THOSE SHOES WERE OLD

With which she followed my poor father's body,

Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she—

O God! A beast that wants discourse of reason

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Would have mourned longer- married
with my uncle,

My father's brother: but no more like my
father

Than I to Hercules (1.11.137-53).

In Hamlet's soliloquy, it seems to be that there is no evidence of an active disgust for his mother's sexuality. Moreover, there is a profound outraged despair stemming from active pride in the sexual splendor of his father, which is specifically what has made her marriage to Claudius insupportable. Thus the marriage has become an unbelievable display of womanly weakness and insensitivity. Thus when the matter reveals that his mother's hastiness in marrying a second time occupies Hamlet, the revelation is one that is already deeply conditioned by our sense of the outrage it represents to the memory of Hamlet's father who projected in Hamlet's eyes a contrastingly noble condition. "Let me not think on it". Think on Gertrude's marriage with Claudius. Hamlet's direction of thought is predetermined by his earlier speech "Must I remember." It makes it clear that Hamlet is also thinking on the splendid union between Gertrude and Hamlet's father now so pitifully outraged.

The motive force in Hamlet's experience lies in his ultimate identification with his father in death and God's reality, including the implicit, favorable judgment assumed to have been bestowed on Hamlet's father, in contrast to the present ignoble life of his mother with Claudius:

O, that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God!
God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! Ah, Fie! 'tis an unweeded
garden,
That grows to seed: things rank and gross
in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to
this!
But two months dead!
And, so, when Horatio finally breaks the
wondrous news of his father's visitation,

the terms in which Hamlet expresses his
impatience with Horatio to tell on are all
in keeping with this fundamental
motivating inspiration motivating
inspiration: 'For God's love, let me hear'
(1.11.195).

With the Ghost's account, however, comes a dramatic reorientation in Hamlet's view. For from the moment the Ghost begins to reveal himself at the interview, it is established for a start that judgment on Hamlet's father has not been favorable as Hamlet has supposed, thus greatly complicating and intensifying the grieved pity Hamlet already feels over the loss of his father in death:

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once
dispatched:
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhous'd, disappointed, unanel'd:
No reck'ning made, but sent to my
account
With all my imperfections on my head.
O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!
If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not:
(1.5.74-83)

The basic cause of the murder of Hamlet's father is the suggestion of a horrible inhumanity represented by a murder whose significance is that he was "Cut off in the blossoms of his sin. 'And the phrase is in some way strange.' Here we get a violent juxtaposition of "sin" with the positive qualities invoked for us by the term "blossoms". But the significance of the phrase is paradoxical and quite terrible. For the Elizabethans, the 'nature' almost always involve the sexual correlative. Here the phrase of the recognition of a power of judgment conveys the sexual optimism of the Elizabethans. The phrase appears to convey the tragic confounding of Hamlet's aesthetic sense. But the metaphysical events have now revealed to be finally punishable in eternity.

The "Ghost" at this point speaks of his "love" as being "of that dignity/ that it went hand in hand even with the vow / I made to her in marriage" which would seem to suggest a 'love' that was sound. But, in fact, the Ghost is here referring to his faithfulness: faithfulness on his part does not imply soundness in the relationship; and we learn here that there was

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Gertrude's adultery with Claudius, and this implies a relationship between Gertrude and the elder Hamlet no longer sound. But, for Calvin, as for Luther, neither faithfulness nor marriage could ever ensure soundness in the sexual relationship; or as Luther puts it: "nothing can cure libido, not even marriage"—And the Ghost's sudden revelation captures indeed all that is most disturbing in the Protestant view, namely that such a significance for sexual love could be known for certain except as a judgment in the other world. It seems to be that Hamlet has treated the sexual problem as if it were a universal affliction. For the effect of this revelation on Hamlet, we must assume, must make of his father's fate a universal embodiment of the tragedy of sexuality.

Whatever the motivating force of Gertrude's adultery and the murder is is really an embodiment of profoundest inhumanity. The significance of such lust is to emphasize the lust in all love, involving a murder that is itself a violent arraignment of sexual love, leading to punishment in eternity for Hamlet's father. In this arraignment we find darker Lutheran view is now brought into further tension with another view that is yet reserved, more indulgent and typically Elizabethan, accordingly which sexual love is innocent, and a normal indulgence of nature to be atoned for and settled through the customary religious rites:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin
Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd:
No reck'ning made, but sent to my
account
With all my imperfections on my head,
O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!

This is a complex implication of some mysterious psychotic disturbance, and we find Hamlet's later hysterical preoccupation with sexuality. It is how *Hamlet's* original sense of the moral-emotional outrage against his father is ultimately experienced. Such hysteria is not to be confused with the "hysteria" over his mother's sexuality displayed in the first soliloquy which has been exaggerated and, I believe, in any case, misinterpreted. The "hysteria" expresses that there measures a gap between his mother's lust for Claudius and the innocent intensity of her sexual love for Hamlet's father. This distinction is not merely intensified, it is tragically confounded by later revelations about the sexual implications of his

father's murder, and no doubt the outrage is the greater for this. Full and immediate revenge is called by the horror of punishment in eternity. Hamlet brings tortuously pained and tragic accusation against Gertrude in the last scene.

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,
And sets a blister there: makes a marriage
vows
As false as dicers' oaths. O, such a deed
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
(111,4,40-51).

An account of blighted love which could be the cause of *Hamlet's* complex accusation, feature the relationship between Hamlet's mother and father as well as the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. So Hamlet's behavior is not to be explained as a mysterious, fundamental disturbance regarding sexuality, one essentially unrelated to the murder: on the contrary, it is precisely Hamlet's disposition in the scene to view the nature of this relationship strictly in relation to the absolute, sexual implications of the murder, particularly its implications for the innocence of love. Hamlet is acting on the assumption that all love is lust, when seen from the perspective of eternal judgment, as true of Hamlet and Ophelia as it was of his father and mother.

It is not enough to give a full account for Hamlet's peculiar hysteria, which seems finally to emerge from the murder's full paradoxical implications of love. These set in tragic conflict, alongside the absolute knowledge of love as lust, a lingering sense of the fundamental innocence of love. Hamlet's behavior in the nunnery- scene is ultimately explained by the knowledge that he could not from an eternal perspective have loved Ophelia with the innocence he supposed. The knowledge itself is endowed with the full pain of a tragic discovery conflicting with the more immediate knowledge that he did and still does. This is characterized in the play by the love between Hamlet and Ophelia and that between Hamlet's father and mother, what the play elaborates as the "rose" in love embodying "rose of May."

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Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia is thus finally bred of Hamlet's new tragic sense of the original sexual paradox. In this tragic condition, it is evident that there can no longer be much significance for the kind of compromises honesty once treated as an absolute honesty, till the Ghost's revelation exposed it as compromise, which once settled the paradox by properly subordinating sexual nature to the rites of religion, specifically to marriage. It is with this consideration in mind, that we must approach Hamlet's new sense of the sexual paradox:

For the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometimes a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. (111.1.111-15)

Here, in *Hamlet*'s reference to "honesty" means "genuineness" or "legitimacy," immediate sense of chastity through a statement viewing the conflict between sexuality and chastity implicitly in relation to the conflict between sexuality and marriage as brought out by the murder. By the latter conflict, I mean primarily the limitations of marriage as a means of restraining sanctifying the sexual drive, limitations exposed by the revelations about his fate made by Hamlet's father but also and more obviously, the sexual considerations which led Hamlet's mother to violate her marriage to Hamlet's father thus ultimately bringing about Hamlet's full tragic discovery about marriage. This last connection makes it inevitable that Hamlet should come to see Gertrude's marriage to Claudius as a living embodiment of all that marriage has been shown not to be: likewise inevitable that the question of an honest love with Ophelia, which could only be kept honest by marriage.

The 'union' and marriage between Gertrude and Claudius have implied a blighted love, not only between Gertrude and the elder Hamlet but also between Hamlet and Ophelia. The union involves the *falsification* of marriage. Beside this, it represents the violation of one marriage by another; the full effect of the union has to destroy the illusion that marriage necessarily sanctifies love. And this is the limitation of marriage alone before the power of sexuality. "The sexual outrage has been so monstrous and so appalling to Heaven, that what it threatens is the breakup of the world itself and the

immediate precipitation of doom and judgment" –claims Hamlet in the rest of his speech. This is more than mere hyperbole. From the representation of Heaven's face this is emphasized as a prodigious sense of shame, but a sense of shame represented significantly as the last which has compelled it, as "heated visage" suggests simultaneously the blush of modesty sexual ardor. The absolute implications of Hamlet's psychological experience lie here specifically as it relates to his awareness of lust as a universal condition portending judgments for all in Eternity.

The outright hysteria that eventually emerges in *Hamlet*'s baffled account only yields more point and penetration to Hamlet's further effort from here to reach out to the basis of a controlling and corrective good lying amidst such a power of lust, which Hamlet desperately assumes must be there in the being in reality, to be touched off, if good is to prevail:

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? (111.4.79-82)

The motivating force behind the plot action in *Hamlet* is the collapse of boundaries between relationships of individuals, sexes and divisions of public and private love. The primary cause of the breakdown results from the bodily contamination spread through overt sexuality, specifically maternal sexuality. This type of contamination is found as that power of women than men fear. It shows the collapse of the father figure into one another and the subsequent trial of differentiation Hamlet had to undergo to secure his position as a son. Finally, it is shown that the play is a gradual breakdown of necessary boundaries between characters.

NOTES

All "quotations" from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Compiled by Peter Alexander. London: Collins, 1951.

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