

Research in to feminist theory in shakespeares' othello and hamlet

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In both feminist theory and Shakespearean criticism, questions of sexuality have consistently been conflicted with questions of gender and gender bias. Feminist theory has been enormously influential in putting issues of sexuality and sexual bias on the critical agenda of Shakespearean text. In particular, the issue of sexual bias in Shakespearean drama can be summed up as simply, male anxiety about female sexuality. In both *Othello the Moor of Venice* and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Feminist criticism proves useful in revealing the bias and anxiety that occurs in the plays with regards to the female characters.

In Shakespearean drama, what engenders the female body is her sexuality. Shakespearean drama idealizes the woman who is "subject to the male gaze; she is the reflector and guarantor of male identity" (Callaghan 14). Hence the male anxiety about women's independence, for her liberty puts masculine self-estimation at risk. In *Othello the Moor of Venice*, the need to suppress the anxieties that female sexuality engenders is tragically manipulated into the murder of the women who brings about those anxieties.

Othello is both emotionally vulnerable to Desdemona and even ambivalent about women in general. It is these anxieties alone which cause *Othello* to be subject to Iago's murderous seduction. Both Iago and *Othello* play Desdemona as a pawn and, in that sense she is only considered an object by the men in the play. Desdemona is portrayed as almost slavishly devoted to her husband. Indeed, having betrayed her father, Desdemona is seen to be suspect to all men in general. Brabantio warns, "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I. ii. 295-<https://assignbuster.com/research-in-to-feminist-theory-in-shakespeares-othello-and-hamlet/>

296). Yet, her father is not the only one who places doubt within the mind of Othello.

Iago, notable for his clever schemes of power, pushes the Moor still by leading Othello into a misconception of everything as well as everyone with whom he involves himself. Iago, having ensnared everyone, makes for a great devil's advocate in arousing the natural instinct of jealousy, which exists to some degree, in each man. Even still, male anxiety toward female erotic power is "channeled into a strategy of containment" (Traub, pg. 26), the erotic threat of the female body.

This anxiety transforms the female body into an inanimate object. The word woman becomes synonymous with the presence or absence of chastity, in terms of life and death. It is Othello who believes that, in ending the life of Desdemona, he alone can restore her virginal quality. Upon smothering her Othello states, "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men/ Put out the light, and then put out the light" (V. ii. 6-7). Othello believes that it is Desdemona's appealing sexuality which has destroyed him and, therefore he must save all mankind from Desdemona's supposed seduction.

A living, breathing woman is too much for Othello. He proclaims that he kills Desdemona as a sort of "public service" to all men, but in reality it stems from his fear of women's sexuality. What Othello wants is essentially an object that is beautiful to look at but will not challenge him in any way, real or imagined. That is to say, that to be a woman in Shakespearean drama means to embody a sexuality that often finds its ultimate expression in

death. Othello cannot fathom the idea of Desdemona as a slavishly devoted wife, until he kills her.

The moment in which the Othello witnesses Desdemona's apparently wholehearted love is also the moment that he attempts to preserve by killing her. " Yet I'll not shed her blood, Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, And smooth as monumental alabaster. " (V. ii. 3-5) Othello's attempt to satisfy his jealousy, while at the same time, the beauty of his love satisfies merely, the various aspects of Desdemona's sexuality being intrusive and threatening to Othello and his identity. Only after he kills Desdemona, does he realize the price of his masculine allegations and anxiety.

Shakespearean tragedy and romance not only depend upon, but are constituted by masculine anxieties. Such is the case with Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, particularly the characters of Gertrude, Hamlet's mother and Ophelia, his beloved. The play's predominately masculine perspective of desire expresses an attitude towards female bodies that, in its purest form, is obviously paranoid. The threat posed by Gertrude's sexuality is projected onto Ophelia, who Hamlet instructs, " Get thee to a nunn'ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? " (III. ii. 0-21). Hamlet wishes Ophelia to go to a nunnery in order for her to live chaste.

Hamlet's hatred for his mother's adultery overpowers the love he feels toward Ophelia. In the madness which is Hamlet's world, the word woman becomes synonymous with the presence or absence of chastity in terms of life and death. Hamlet displaces disgust for the Queen's erotic mobility onto Ophelia, and adopts his father's strategy of aggression. Denied the power of

rational expression, she goes mad. Ophelia has no voice in a masculine world and is seen as property.

Notice how even Polonius treats her as a prostitute, she will "tender" Hamlet a fool. She certainly cannot be a knower. "My Lord, I do not know what to think" (II. iii. 24-25), she tells her father. Ophelia's death is much an outcome of Hamlet's rage. Contaminated in life by the taint of Gertrude's adultery, Ophelia reclaims sexual desirability only as a dead, but everlasting virgin. Thus, in the masculine world of Shakespearean drama it can be concluded that "the only good virgin is a dead virgin" (Thompson 2).

Only after Ophelia's death does Hamlet realize the sheer innocence that was her life. As Gertrude's adultery turns all women to prostitutes and all men into potential cuckolds, Hamlet's world is transformed into "an unweeded garden that grows to seed. In this vile and seductive garden, sexually threatening women poison vulnerable and unwitting men" (Traub 29). Thus, through their erotic power women are seen to control such extremities as life and death.

A feminist perspective would offer that, in the case of such anxieties as a woman's sexuality cause, the very lifeline of a man would depend on the life of the woman with whom he attains control. Such is the case with Hamlet; he fails to control the actions of his mother and his lover. Hence, the demise of all that embodies Hamlet's masculinity. In the end, both Desdemona and Ophelia die; but at least in the case of Desdemona, a feminist voice, that of Emilia resists her death, proclaiming it murder. Emilia acknowledges her own sexual being, more importantly the sexual being of any woman.

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Clearly, Emilia holds feminist views. Likewise, in her bawdy songs, Ophelia asserts a kind of feminist, erotic agency before her death. It is because; crucially whatever containment of female subjectivity is textually achieved depends entirely upon the repression of female power. It is this fear, of female power, ultimately of the subject's desire that leads Hamlet and Othello to long for detachment, for a reprieve from the anxieties of erotic life, the fetishization of the dead, virginal Ophelia, the poisoning of the adulteress Queen, and the erotized death of Desdemona.

In response to their fear that such security and calm are not available, they displace their desire for it onto the women with whom they are most intimate. In turn, the lives of these women are ended abruptly simply because in life, the anxiety they cause is unbearable and it is only in death that men find serenity in the masculine world that is Shakespeare