

## THE EXCESS AND THE DEFICIT: EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF SEXUALITY IN *HAMLET* AND *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

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### **Abstract**

Hamlet (1601) and Measure for Measure (1604) are two of William Shakespeare's plays that have drawn the attention of many critics. These plays have been described as 'problem plays' by most of the critics. Both the plays are seen as specimen that subverts social order. One major aspect that these plays bring to the foreground is the action of the central woman character. In Hamlet and Measure for Measure, the central character who is a woman, finds herself accused. This accusation emerges out of sexuality. Gertrude in Hamlet is accused of too much of sexuality and Isabella in Measure for Measure for not enough of it. This cause various problems in the both the plays. They are the one who acts as a catalyst to the male characters. It is because of their excessive or underdone sexuality that misleads men and creates various problems thus defining them as 'problem plays.' Thus, in the plays, the 'excess' and the 'deficient' has appeared to be the crucial crux of the play. The aim of this paper is to study the role of central women characters in the plays and how the woman occupies a crucial but difficult place that manipulates various events in both the plays.

**Keywords:** Play, Problem, Shakespeare, Sexuality, Theatre.

### **Introduction:**

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defining them as ‘problem plays.’ Thus, in the plays, the ‘excess’ and the ‘deficient’ has appeared to be the crucial crux of the play. The aim of this paper is to study the role of central women characters in the plays and how the woman occupies a crucial but difficult place that manipulates various events in both the plays.

### **Discussion:**

In his famous essay, *Hamlet and his Problems*, (1919) T.S.Eliot has put forward his central concept of the ‘Objective Correlative’ in the form of a critique.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of an art is by finding an objective correlative, in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot, 1919, pg. 49)

Objective correlative is thus, the aesthetic matching of emotion to an object which is the pre-condition for proper aesthetic form. According to Eliot, *Hamlet* is an ‘artistic failure.’ “So far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure.” (Eliot, 1919, pg. 48)

The objective correlative fails in *Hamlet* because Gertrude is not sufficient as a character to carry the weight of the affect which she creates or generates in the chief character of the play. In *Hamlet*, the failure is Gertrude’s who deprives not only her son but also the play of the proper emotional support. The very imperfection of the play has brought in the power to seduce the audience of *Hamlet*. This is probably because-

“...more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art.” (Eliot, 1919, pg. 49)

*Hamlet* is a flawed masterpiece but its very failing, acts as a pull on the spectators.

In Shakespeare’s more successful tragedies, there is an artistic equivalence. The state of mind of Lady Macbeth’s walk in her sleep has been communicated to the audience by a skillful “accumulation of imagined sensory impressions.” (Eliot, 1919, pg. 48). The words of Macbeth on hearing his wife’s death leads us to figure out that these words are released automatically and are related to the last series of events.

MACBETH- She should have died hereafter  
There would have been a time  
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (Act 5, Sc.5)

Thus the emotion is attached to the external events and happenings and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. There is an imbalance between the character of Hamlet’s expressed feelings and the events by which they seem to be evoked.

In both *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*, it is the woman who provides a crisis that subverts social order in Denmark of *Hamlet* and Vienna of *Measure for Measure*. In *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*, it is sexuality that entails danger and violates order and decorum. Gertrude's over hasty marriage and Isabella's refusal to comply with Angelo's demands and her staunch opposition to submit produces an image of sexuality which is unmanageable- which cannot hold in its place.

Hamlet's depression is not his father's death. The Ghost in Act 1, scene V comments-

GHOST- Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.  
 HAMLET- Murder!  
 GHOST- Murder most foul, as in the best it is;  
 But this most foul, strange and unnatural.  
 HAMLET- Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift  
 As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
 May sweep to my revenge. (Act 1, Sc. V)

In the final scene of Act 1, the Ghost of King Hamlet unearths the mysterious death of King Hamlet by Hamlet's uncle Claudius. Hamlet's faith in his mother shatters further when the ghost comments-

Ghost- Ay, those incestuous, that adulterate beast  
 With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,  
 O wicked wits and gifts, that have the power  
 So to seduce! - won to his shameful lust  
 The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen:  
 O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!  
 From me, whose love was of that dignity  
 That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
 I made to her in marriage, and to decline  
 Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor  
 To those of mine. (Act 1, Sc. V)

In Shakespeare's plays sexuality becomes one of the major contributing factors towards the development of the plot. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra is the monarch but we rarely see her performing any of such functions. She meets with Antony, falls in love with him and appears to be totally devoted to pleasure and tries to fulfill her desires through her relation to Antony. Antony too, seems to have acquired new interest in the land of Ptolemies. When he is in Egypt, Rome seems cold and grey to him. Hence when the messenger comes with a 'Roman News', Antony exclaims-

ANTONY- Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
 Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space.  
 Kingdoms are but clay. (Act 1, Sc. 1)

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet's despondency lies on the fact that his mother has had a haste remarriage. What is important to note is that Gertrude remarries Claudius and still retains her power and position as the Queen of Denmark. She is not the widow of the dead king. But this remarriage has helped her in maintaining her position as the Queen. Did she seek social stability or self security, is unknown to the audience and the readers. Observing her son's dullness after his father's death, Gertrude remarks-

Gertrude- Thou know'st 'tis common, - all that lives must  
 die, (Act 1, Sc. II)

What requires observation here is that in *Hamlet*, though Gertrude is an inadequate object for the emotions generated in the play, she is expected to support them. In the bed chamber scene of Act 3, Sc. IV, Gertrude realizes her mistakes. Hamlet says-

HAMLET- Confess yourself to heaven;  
 Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;  
 And do not spread the compost on the weeds,  
 To make them ranker. (Act 3, Sc. IV)

This makes Gertrude realize her sinful act of remarriage. She says-

GERTRUDE- These words like daggers enter in mine ears;  
 No more, sweet Hamlet. (Act 3, Sc. IV)

Hamlet's horror for Gertrude makes her a focus for the set of ills which the drama shows- thus making her the chief cause of the so called 'problem' in the problem play. Thus we have the famous lines which Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Hamlet to project the weakness of women-

HAMLET- So excellent a king that was, to this,  
 Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother,  
 That he might not beteem 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! (Act 1, Sc. II)

It is thus, a son's feeling towards a guilt mother, which according to Eliot is 'unmanageable by art.' Eliot remarks-

"Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son."  
 (Eliot, 1919, pg.48)

Behind Eliot's reading we find a whole history to unearth that woman embodies versus the social order she is required to uphold. Whereas, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony's impulsiveness and his inability to make decisions make him appear weak. This is because 'Egypt' exhibits a magnetic charm on him.

ANTONY- Egypt, thou knew'st too well  
 My heart was to thy rudder tied by th'strings. (Act 3, Sc. II)

One of the first mistakes of Antony is letting himself to be drawn to the world of Egypt and its 'Epicurean delights'- signifying Cleopatra's whims and fancies. Here too, like Hamlet's Gertrude, Cleopatra is seen as the major force in the destruction of Antony's downfall.

In the Mouse-trap scene of *Hamlet*, the play queen shows her undying love to her husband through various vows.

P. QUEEN- Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;  
 Where little fears grow great, great love grows there. (Act 3, Sc. II)

The main motif of Hamlet staging this act was to figure out the behavior of Claudius and Gertrude, to verify the 'Ghost's Words.' (Act 3, Sc. II). Freudian psychoanalysis has coined the word 'parapraxes'. These are the slip of tongue, banglings, squabbling, misreading, jokes which brings the unconscious to the surface. Hamlet was successful to figure out the murder of his father through the help of the Mouse-trap play. On seeing the actions of the Player King and the Player Queen, Claudius became hesitant and begged God for mercy. Thus the play within the play provides an insight to Claudius' previous actions.

In case of Gertrude, this Mouse-trap play enabled her to know her frailties which cropped out of her excessive sexuality and the over haste marriage. Gertrude in general knows that she has crossed the barriers of social decorum and recognizes the Player Queen as a rebuke or foil comments-

GERTRUDE- The lady protests too much, methinks. (Act 3, Sc. II)

This comment in general refers to the inconsistency of females. An interesting matter to ponder upon is that, after the death of a husband, what happens to the sexuality of woman? Who is there to hold on its dangerous excess within a society that is full of constraint? The sexual urge is a primitive urge in human beings. Freudian psychoanalysis terms it 'id'. However, the realistic principle, the 'ego' constantly works upon to suppress the id. Sometimes in the conflict between the id and the ego, the ego is unable to catch hold of the id and it rises above the ego. This creates psychological disorders in human beings. A person in such an occasion builds up a delusional reality of his own and starts to live in it. In case of Gertrude, she has fulfilled her desires by her remarriage. This in turn, creates a hysteric effect directly on her son. Hamlet realizes the over sexuality of his mother. Thus comments-

HAMLET- Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed;  
Pinch wanton on your cheek; call you his mouse;  
And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,  
Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,  
Make you to ravel all this matter out,  
That I essentially am not in madness,  
But mad in craft. (Act 3, Sc. IV)

Among the various aspects of Hamlet's character, one main thing that continuously draws our attention towards the protagonist is his oedipal relation to Gertrude. The Oedipal complex as formulated by Freud is a psychoanalytic theory which encompasses the idea of unconsciously desiring the parent opposite in sex, while desiring to eliminate the parent of the same sex. In the case of Hamlet, it is seen that he does hold these feelings for his mother but Hamlet's situation is somewhat opposite to Oedipus because he never fulfils the Oedipal desires. The queen's relationship with his son goes beyond the normal mother son relationship as portrayed in the bed-chamber scene. The presence of Gertrude evokes a sense of discomfort in Hamlet that he might intend to murder his mother.

HAMLET- Come, Come, and sit you down; you shall not budge;  
You go not till I set you up a glass  
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

QUEEN- What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?  
Help, help, ho! (Act 3, Sc. IV)

Hamlet desires to kill not his father (here, Uncle Claudius) but his mother instead. But the murder of Polonius is the immediate outcome of it. Once again the woman feels guilty for the effect she provokes.

HAMLET- A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother,  
As kill a king and marry with his brother. (Act 3, Sc. IV)

Hamlet finds a love interest in Ophelia but the image of his mother has created a negative impact on his mind due to which Hamlet acts strangely with his lover too.

HAMLET- I loved you not.  
OPHELIA- I was the more deceived.

HAMLET- Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs, marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them.  
(Act 3, Sc. II)

Hamlet was of the idea that Ophelia lied him but Ophelia's thoughts are designed by Polonius hence there comes a change in Ophelia's behavior towards Hamlet.

POLONIUS- Ophelia,  
Do not believe his vows; for they are brokers,  
Not of that dye which their investment shows,  
But mere implorators of unholy suits,  
Breaching like sanctified and pious bawds,  
The better to beguile. (Act 1, Sc. III)

In this way, Hamlet's feelings towards his mother and his lover are both smashed. Again another woman is found responsible for the change in Hamlet's character. Hamlet, in response to his mother's flagrancy and scandalous attitude projects the same attitude onto the image of the innocent Ophelia who later gives up her life herself.

“...practically speaking, Ophelia is seen as an innocent victim swept away in the convulsion caused by the error or guilt of others.” (Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Pg. 124)

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony misreads Cleopatra's character thinking that 'the vile lady' has robbed Antony of his honour by coming in terms with Octavius. Like Hamlet, Antony's love is also beguiled. Antony comments-

ANTONY- She hath betrayed me and shall die the death. (Act 4, Sc. 14)

In *Measure for Measure*, after Angelo becomes the Duke of Vienna, he decides to place sexual license under penalty.

ANGELO- We must not make a scarecrow of the Law,  
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,  
And let it keep one shape, till custom make it  
Their perch, and not their terror. (Act 2, Sc. I)

Many critics argue that sexual transgression in the world is a common human instinct. Again drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis, we can say that Freud too pointed out sex as the chief drive of human instinct. This unrestrained sexual quality is constantly subverting the social order of the state in Vienna. Anarchy threatens to engulf the state. Thus sexuality is subjected to regulation under the new duke- Angelo. Whatever the identities of the sexual offenders are, the authority wants to possess complete control over them. This control can be achieved through construction.

ANGELO- What's open made to Justice,  
That Justice seizes. (Act 2, Sc. I)

Though prostitution and crisis are seen as the main cause of lechery in the play we see how corruption prevails even in the top layers of authority. At the beginning of the play we see how corruption is downwardly identified and focused on low-life license.

LUCIO- Behold, behold, where Madam Mitigation comes.  
I have purchas'd as many diseases under her roof, as  
Come to- (Act 1, Sc. 2)

The words of Lucio, a dandy of Vienna shows the nature of common men in Vienna. Yet in the character of Angelo, Shakespeare shows how corruption is spread in the world of the rulers too.

Even the Duke fails to recognize that it is not the vice of common men but the mighty power of Angelo that causes evil in the play. It is reflected in Isabella's speech-

ISABELLA- But man, proud man,  
 Dress'd in a little brief authority,  
 Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,  
 (His glassy essence) like an angry ape  
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,  
 As make the angels weep: who with our spleens,  
 Would all themselves laugh mortal. (Act 2, Sc. II)

It is an irony of life that puny man is not aware or conscious of his falability.

One important point to note here is that Angelo's transgression results not from authority but from his human instincts and desires. It shows the descent of rulers into the world of sins. The image of the Duke in Angelo is later subverted when he is provoked into sexual desire by the virtue of Isabella.

ANGELO- She speaks and 'tis such sense  
 That my sense breeds with it; fare you well. (Act 2, Sc. II)

The role of the Duke subverts from being the legislator to that of a 'vice'. Again in *Measure for Measure* too, it is seen that a woman is creating problems in the play. Again sexuality becomes the major cause here too.

Over chastity is seen as the cause of deficiency in the play. Isabella's over chastity is seen as the 'problem' by many critics. She has been the object of 'excessive admiration' as well as 'excessive repugnance'. Her rejection to submit to Angelo's wants and desires and the refusal to sacrifice her chaste for the sake of her brother makes many critics comment on the fact that she is 'self-centered', 'ice-cold', 'lacking in humanity, feeling or warmth.' Isabella states that promiscuity is a 'vice'.

ISABELLA- There is a vice that most I do abhor,  
 And most desire should meet the blow of justice;  
 For which I would not plead, but that I must,  
 For which I must not plead, but that I am  
 At war, 'twixt will, and will not. (Act 2, Sc.II)

For Isabella, her chaste, her virginity is most important. In her reaction of such kind, she is simply echoing the social conditioning of the day, which elevated the significance of female purity. Isabella is the only female character in *Measure for Measure* unlike other female characters that operates within a patriarchal world and yet rejects the ideas of marriage and sex. This gives significance to her silence when the duke proposes marriage to her; she is perhaps showing that she will not accept a status of male dominance.

Thus, Isabella represents the females that are a victim of the male dominant society, especially of male lust and manipulation. In case of Gertrude, it is the woman who bears the burden of reproach. But in case of Isabella, she is a victim of male lust and desire. Gertrude at the end of the play faces death by drinking poison that was actually a plot of Claudius to kill Hamlet.

KING- Gertrude, do not drink.  
 QUEEN- I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me.  
 KING- [Aside] It is the poison'd cup; it is too late. (Act 5, Sc. II)

Thus the woman faces her tragic death. Not only she but also the other major characters Hamlet, Laertes and Claudius are thrashed to death.

But in case of Isabella, she gains insight as the play moves towards the end. Her final pleading for Angelo's life shows her final step towards maturity. This is what the Duke has been working for since the third act.

ISABELLA- I partly think,  
A due sincerity governed his deeds,  
Till he did look on me: Since it is so,  
Let him not die: my brother had but justice,  
In that he did the thing for which he died.  
For Angelo, his act did not o'ertake his bad intent,  
And must be buried as an intent  
That perish'd by the way: thoughts are no subjects,  
Intents, but merely thoughts. (Act 5, Sc.1)

Thus, to conclude, in the words of Eliot,

“...the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticize it according to the standards, in comparison to other works of art.” (Eliot, 1919, pg. 47)

### **Conclusion:**

Both *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* even though the plays are male centered, it is the central female characters that manipulates the events of the play. In both the plays, order is both asserted and it fails. The fact that it is a woman who is seen as the cause of the excess and the deficient plus it is the woman that causes the same artistic failure for the plays. Justice is ultimately given to the female characters at the end of the plays. Gertrude gets her poetic justice by facing her death and Isabella moves from ignorance to enlightenment. Thus, the women characters in the play cause the chief crisis in the play that subverts social order and decorum in *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*.

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