A Feminist ‘Attack’ on Post-Structuralist and Psychoanalytical Readings of Hamlet

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This paper will do three things, the first of which will be to describe Jaqueline Rose’s argument within her essay, “Hamlet—The Mona Lisa of Literature.” The second task of this paper will be to explain what is at stake within Rose’s essay as it relates to previous criticism such as that of Irigaray, Freud, Woolf, and Derrida. Finally, by drawing upon the idea (in Rose’s paper) of femininity as a fetishized concept that equals the opposite of “good” a correlation in opposition will be drawn between what she is trying to accomplish and what Freud argues in “The Theme of The Three Caskets.” In order to expand and slightly critique both Rose’s and Freud’s arguments, an interpretation of *Hamlet* will follow in which the character of Ophelia will be examined. For Freud Ophelia will be shown as representative of the feminine illustration of death. While for Rose, Ophelia’s mad scene will be seen as the appropriation/transfiguration by a woman of the degrading masculine stereotypes that have oppressed her.

I

As a response to all previous criticism, feminist criticism offers a solely *female* perspective to everything it touches upon. In a lot of cases this means that what the feminist writer does is explicate and/or exonerate a woman’s role in literature. Jaqueline Rose is no exception to this stereotype as in her essay "Hamlet—The Mona Lisa of Literature” she excuses Gertrude from the aspersions cast upon the queen by critics such as T.S. Eliot, Ernst Jones,
Sigmund Freud, and Andre Green. By drawing upon these post-structuralist and
psychoanalytical critics, Rose offers a new feminist interpretation of both as they relate to
Hamlet.

At the end of her essay Rose questions:

what does it mean to us that one of the most elevated and generally esteemed works of
our Western literary tradition should enact such a negative representation of femininity,
or even such a violent repudiation of the femininity in man? (197)

This is the crux of her paper. Within this one sentence is everything that Jacqueline Rose is
reacting against. Her essay addresses first the issue of how the females in Hamlet have come to
be represented negatively and second the idea that by making Hamlet’s femininity “acceptable”
on the stage the fact that he was acting in a feminine manner was negated (197). The point in
Rose’s addressing the issue of these representations of femininity is to point out how the
feminine ‘identity’ is being abused in the critical discourses which repress the free expression of
emotions.

Her essay begins as a reaction to T.S. Eliot’s attack on Gertrude’s behavior as being “not
good enough aesthetically” (186). For Eliot aesthetics have to do with emotions, and in the play
he sees Hamlet’s reaction to his mother’s remarriage as in “excess” of what it should be (187).
Because of this “excess” the play fails aesthetically and the blame for this in Eliot’s mind can
only be laid on the figure of a woman—Gertrude. The “excess” has to do with the sexual nature
of the queen, in that she married so quickly (an action in itself in excess of the proper time of
mourning). Thus, the female in Hamlet is turned into a negative image that causes the aesthetic
downfall of the play.

In the next section of her paper, Rose goes on to write about a psychoanalytical approach
to Hamlet in which the basic Oedipal complex theory is called into question. Instead of allowing
the solution to be that simple, Rose questions the femininity in Hamlet himself and how this can be related to the Oedipal complex in which, perhaps, he did not only desire the mother but also *identify* with her. This line of reasoning calls into debate whether or not the excess in the play is wholly enacted by the females, or if it is only the idea that “femininity itself functions as excess” (195). If the latter is the case than the notion that femininity as it proceeds from the female is an aesthetic disturbance cannot be held as true. If femininity itself is present in both female and male than the blame cannot be laid on the woman and therefore femininity cannot be the problem with art.

In the end, Rose’s argument is merely for critics and all humanity to beware pigeonholing the feminine into a place of blame. Femininity is a concept against which male generated discourses of thought constantly come up against in their attempts to uphold a cultural order in which the masculine is privileged. By making the feminine equal the problem, critics are doing a disservice to a way of evaluating the world that holds the potential to explain things that they cannot within a masculine discourse.

**II**

To begin with, Rose’s argument hinges on several ideas espoused in previous critical papers. The main critical schools of thought that she is drawing upon are feminist criticism, post-structural criticism, and psychoanalytical criticism. In order to understand exactly what Rose is doing it is imperative to gain a thorough comprehension of her predecessors.

Two feminist and one post-structural critic whose ideas are apparent in Rose’s paper, complement one another in their ideas on language. The post-structural ideas of Derrida become
clear when Rose writes of writing. She writes about the “moment of repression when language and sexuality were first ordered into place” (190). What she means by this is that language and sexuality were divided into the concepts of masculine and feminine. The fact that it was a “moment of repression” stands for the fact that somehow a language and a sex were made inferior to another language and another sex. This is obviously the dominating system of masculine over feminine that pervades social thought. Derrida in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” wrote of a rupture “in which language invaded the universal problematic” (879). For Derrida then, language was the cause of a rupture in thought and language, inherently, holds certain rules that he feels should govern all critical thought. In relation to Rose’s quote above, both these views of language show it as suddenly appearing and ordering the surrounding universe.

For Virginia Woolf and Luce Irigaray, the lack of a completely feminine discourse within this ordering is a problem that they attempt to redress. They are in fact trying to cause another rupture, one in which the Derrida’s decentered center would be split into two and a feminine language could exist alongside, and be equal to, the existing masculine dominating one. In “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf speaks of Nineteenth century novelists as having difficulties primarily because “when they came to set their thoughts to paper. . .they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help” (558). Women have no language of their own and must attempt to use a male method of writing, which they cannot complete as their lives run on a different course from a man’s. As such, while they write about parlor rooms, men write about war, and the masculine discourse is favored over the feminine one. Women need to adhere to a language of their own and force it to be accepted in order to take their place fully in the world as the equal of the male. Irigaray is much more challenging in her essay, “This Sex
Which Is Not One,” where she challenges the phallocentrism of the masculine language by calling into question the dominance of the penis over the vagina. Irigaray states that woman’s language is “constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized” (1470). Woman’s language then embraces the definition of femininity as fluid and ever-changing. By appropriating for herself the stereotypes typically used to denigrate her station, the female can reclaim a place in the male dominated discourse.

These ideas of feminine and masculine language inform Rose’s argument in that she is writing about a woman who is not permitted to represent herself. Her reaction to T.S. Eliot’s portrayal of Gertrude as the “character [who] is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing”’ (188), is to confer onto her a positive feminine representation based on feminist thought.

The third major school of criticism that Rose incorporates into her essay is that of psychoanalysis. She first lays down one of the most famous psychoanalytical approaches to Hamlet, that of the Oedipal complex as interpreted by Ernst Jones:

Jones sees 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. The difference between Oedipus and Hamlet is that Oedipus unknowingly acts out this fantasy, whereas for Hamlet it is repressed into the unconscious revealing itself in the form of that inhibition or inability to act (193).

This interpretation is classic Freud, who first revealed the social phenomenon that he coined the Oedipal stage. This idea is now widely disseminated and has spawned whole libraries of work. However, what interests Rose is not this interpretation, but what Freud and Jones also say about Hamlet that is not as often repeated. In her essay she goes on to talk about how Freud referred to Hamlet as both “melancholic and hysteric” (193). The consequences of this are extreme,
because what these terms commonly referred to was women. Men were not melancholy nor did they have bouts of hysteria—on the contrary, these were feminine illnesses of “excess.” To call Hamlet a creature of feminine habits initiates a re-inspection of the Oedipal reading of the play. The first stage of the Oedipal complex is an identification of the child with the mother, then an unconscious sexual desire for the mother, and a rivalry with the father for the mother’s attention. However if Hamlet is behaving in a feminine manner then he is still identifying with the mother and the reading that hinges on his desire for his mother is problematized.

In calling one of most common interpretations of Hamlet’s psyche into question Rose renders a male oriented concept (Oedipal complex) into contradiction with itself through the use of feminist theory. Disregarding the blow she has made to Freud’s discourse she goes on to write, “The point being not whether Hamlet suffers from an excess of femininity, but the way that femininity itself functions as excess” (195). With this statement she brings her argument back in line with the very masculine notions of female behavior that she is opposing. Specifically the idea that femininity is an “excess” of emotion, or causes an “excess” of emotion in others through the sexuality of the female.

Through the use of these three schools of criticism, Jaqueline Rose makes quite the case for the feminine problematic. In the post-structural debates over language and the text she puts a feminist spin on the approach to language itself as a concept with a masculine signifier which must be redressed. In psychoanalysis, she shows how the femininity of women and men infringes on the division of behavioral types into classifications of feminine and masculine. In conclusion to her essay Rose writes:

. . .those who celebrate or seek to uphold that order, with no regard to the image of woman it encodes, constantly find themselves up against a problem which they call femininity—a reminder of the precarious nature of the certainties on which that order rests (197).
The order of masculine domination has within it a flaw that “they” (critics who uphold the Western/European tradition) call femininity. Jaqueline Rose argues in this essay that femininity is not so much a flaw as it is a source of power in a work of fiction or art. The very “precariousness” of the Eurocentric mind-set is what feminists attack in an attempt to make a place for women’s equality.

III

In her paper Rose is arguing for a more positive representation of femininity in literature and, by expansion, to the world at large. She accomplishes her goal through the use of the play Hamlet, and in particular the characters of Gertrude and Hamlet, to cast a note of doubt on some commonly held misconceptions about femininity. Her reaction in critical theory can be seen as coming, in part, from Freud’s pronouncements about women in his essay, “The Theme of the Three Caskets.” In this essay, Freud posits that women have been made into images of love and beauty but this is merely a façade underneath which resides their true form of death. These two authors in conjunction show opposing ends to the same means. Both of them are attempting to dispel myths about females, but Freud comes to a destructive conclusion for femininity and Rose comes to a constructive one. In order to prove by example what each critic is doing, a critical interpretation of the character of Ophelia will follow in which she will be reduced to a destructive image of death (for Freud) and a constructive image of a femininity finding its own expression (for Rose).

In “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” Freud writes of how man realizes that “he too is a part of nature and therefore subject to the immutable law of death” (492). When man comes to
the realization that he can die something in him rebels against this idea. Man does not want to
die and, in fact, fears the nothingness of death with all of his living being. In reaction to this,
man uses his imaginary capability to make death into a positive image by simply replacing it
with its opposite: “the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love” (492). The fact
that both of these representations are female speaks volumes about the masculine view of
women. Women in this instance can only be one of two things—the bringer of death or the giver
of love. They can only be perfect or terrible. This does not leave much room for women to be
themselves as they are forced into pre-defined categories that either idealize them or try to
repudiate them.

In her essay, Rose also addresses this when she writes about “that familiar mystification
or fetishisation of femininity which makes of the woman something both perfect and dangerous
or obscene (obscene if not perfect)” (189). This myth of women Rose can only see as hindering
woman’s place. By making woman “perfect” (Goddess of Love) she is turned into an
idealization within the minds of men which confers onto her by transference too little space to be
herself. By making woman “dangerous or obscene” (Goddess of Death) she is degraded into a
receptacle for blame within the minds of men who cannot countenance the role of Death in their
lives.

The problem then becomes in Rose’s mind how the female is represented in literature and
how if she does not fit into either of these two images the play fails aesthetically because of the
woman’s acting ‘out of character.’ Rose says of this dilemma as it is suggested by T.S. Eliot:

what is in fact felt as inscrutable, unmanageable, or even horrible for an aesthetic theory
which will only allow into its definition what can be controlled or managed by art is
nothing other than femininity itself” (189).
Femininity, then, becomes the blame for the downfall of the aesthetic beauty of the play. Because she is “inscrutable, unmanageable, or even horrible,” man, with his “ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance” (Irigaray 1469) cannot understand or manage her. Instead of viewing this as a bad thing, Rose suggests that the femininity that Eliot sees as blocking the play should actually be seen as the “source of fascination or even strength” in the play (188). Instead of compartmentalizing women into split images of either love or death, femininity should be allowed free expression and appreciated for what it can add to the play’s overall nuances.

By looking at the play itself two readings can be gleaned of the representation of femininity. A Freudian critic would say that in Ophelia’s mad scene Ophelia is representative of Death, as she speaks of death, is soon to die, and is one of the causes of both Hamlet’s and Laertes’ deaths. Rose, on the other hand, would argue that Ophelia is at one and the same time both a representation of death and of a female sexuality that is expressing itself as a reaction to a repressive social order.

In his essay “The Theme of the Three Caskets” Freud writes that in Lear, Shakespeare is showing the reader that the original myth of the woman as the Goddess of Death shows through her representation as the Goddess of Love in the character of Cordelia—“a reduction to the original idea of the myth is going on, so that we once more perceive the original meaning containing all the power to move us that had been weakened by the distortion of the myth” (493). The same can be said for the character of Ophelia in Hamlet. Ophelia too represents a character whose true nature as an image of death can be perceived in the scene in which she goes ‘mad.’ When she first comes into the Queen’s presence she sings a song of death for, presumably, her dead father. Within the rest of the scene she sings five more snippets of songs, three of which are about death. As a prologue to Ophelia’s entrance it is said that her language signifies
“nothing” (IV.v.7). Ophelia’s speech within the confines of the court means nothing, she has nothing to say, nothing that is understood. In Freudian terms, this would be taken to mean that she is mute, she has no language that makes sense. And in “The Theme of the Three Caskets” muteness for Freud is emblematic of the grave and death. He puts it in these terms: “psycho-analysis has to say that dumbness is in dreams a familiar representation of death” (490). Ophelia then by way of what she says and how she is defined as saying “nothing” becomes a symbol of death within the play.

Near the end when Ophelia hands out flowers to the Queen, King, and Laertes, it could be said that she is strewing the flowers on her own grave. When the Queen comes in and relates the story of Ophelia’s drowning, her telling of it gives the impression that in dying Ophelia was “fantastic”, “mermaid-like”, and “melodious” (V.i.168, 176, 182). In essence Ophelia died beautifully, a mermaid-like creature who floated along singing until the weight of her clothes pulled her under. It is no coincidence that there are so many artistic representations of Ophelia drowning. Artists attempt in their representations to show Ophelia as a beautiful “siren” or “waif” or as “sensual” thus covering up the reality of her as a dead woman (Showalter 229). However, these images of beauty and love fail to entirely mask the truth of Ophelia as an object of death—as the representation in human form of the Goddess of Death. Finally, Ophelia’s death also heralds the deaths of Hamlet and Laertes. Laertes wants revenge on Hamlet for the deaths of his father and his sister and goes along with the King’s duel plan in order to achieve that revenge. Yet, in the course of the duel both men die, poisoned by the same rapier. In Freudian terms Ophelia is the “silent goddess of Death” (Freud 494) who takes into her embrace Hamlet, Laertes, her father, the Queen, and the King.
In contrast to the above definition of Ophelia as the image of the Goddess of Death/Love, Rose would offer a separate interpretation that confers upon Ophelia a celebration of herself as a female. Instead of limiting Ophelia to only one definition Rose is an advocate that females can be many things simultaneously and that they must be understood and accepted through their very femininity. In her essay, Rose comments on the themes of death and sexuality that run throughout *Hamlet*. She states that these two themes rely on the concepts of “mourning and marriage—the former the means whereby death is given its symbolic form and enters back into social life, the latter the means whereby sexuality is brought into the orbit of the law” (192). According to Eliot and for Freudian critics—if a feminine excess of either mourning or marriage appears in a work of literature than the motives of the play can no longer be deciphered because the aesthetic value of it is ruined. Rose, on the other hand argues that if there is a feminine excess then understanding it can provide the key to the whole work of literature.

Ophelia in the mad scene is representative of an excess of both mourning (her fascination with death imagery in her songs) and of marriage. The excess of marriage comes from the fact that in excess of the common definition of marriage, Ophelia’s “sexuality” is not “brought into the orbit of the law” through marriage. Instead of being married she has been deflowered outside of the sanction of a social institution that would approve of her giving into her desires. She has therefore acted in excess of what is permissible and because of a social order that would ostracize her for her actions she goes ‘mad’ trapped into a representation of femininity that she does not fit.

Her speech then can be seen as a last attempt to make clear to the other characters who she truly is. In the ‘mad’ scene then, Rose would concentrate on Ophelia’s use of language and how it is marked by “extravagant metaphors, lyrical free associations, and ‘explosive sexual..."
imagery” (Showalter 224). For example one of the songs that Ophelia sings contains the lines, “Let in the maid, that out a maid / Never departed more. Young men will do’t if they come to’t, / By Cock, they are to blame” (IV.v.58-61). In these four lines, Ophelia could be seen as hinting that Hamlet seduced her, promised to wed her, and then reneged on his promise. Instead of accepting the blame for this as most females who act on their sexuality were made to do, Ophelia places the blame squarely on the man’s head.¹ Instead then of regulating her dialogue to that of a female in subordination to the male order of dominance, Ophelia plays with language to express an emergent femininity that does not accept common assumptions about how it should be made aesthetically pleasing to the male eye and ear. In excess, Ophelia renders the femininity problematic into no problem at all. By reading Ophelia’s conversation on the basis of a feminist critical approach, the problem that other critics had with the text of Hamlet are dispersed because feminist criticism does not seek to encode the female into one or the other of a “degradation or an idealization” (Rose 196). Instead, feminist critics try to present a realistic representation of the female character.

From these two critical interpretations of Hamlet, the theories of Freudian and feminist critics have been used in an effort to better understand the play. By bringing feminist criticism to bear on psychoanalytical criticism Rose displays how that method of analyzing literature does not do full justice to the work of art it is evaluating. In her own rendition of how critical theory should progress she claims that only feminist criticism can have any hope of interpreting the “enigma of femininity” (189) that has stumped such critics as Eliot, Freud, Ernst Jones, and Andre Green.

¹ Pun intended.
List of Works Cited


