The Feminine in Hamlet
Towards a Feminist Interpretation of the Danish Prince

by

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The Feminine. The Great Mother. The Unconscious. The World of the Spirits. Receptivity. Intuition. Chaos. Disease. Death. All these represent mythic images of the feminine. Woman as the Great Mother Goddess is the source of life and as Pandora and Eve, the source of evil. Women's bodies are seen as polluted and unclean. Woman is the source of love and of punishment. As the Mahabharata says "Woman is an all-devouring curse. In her body the evil cycle of life begins afresh, born out of lust engendered by blood and semen. Man emerges mixed with excrement and water, fouled with the impurities of woman. A wise man will avoid the contaminating society of women as he would the touch of bodies infested with vermin."

Woman is a temptress who tempts men to sexual intercourse, is sexually insatiable, and drains men of their strength. Woman is vampire, harpy, siren, demoness. Woman is Delilah, Cleopatra, Salome. But woman is also Venus, Helen, Diana.


It will be the thesis of this paper that The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is a story about what happens when the feminine element and the masculine element are out of balance, when the feminine and the masculine can find no harmony, both in a society and within the individual. To further this aim it will be necessary to turn to modern feminist thought as developed by Carol Gilligan, Phyllis Chesler, Nancy Chodorow and others, who have been attempting to develop a philosophy based on differences in world view between the masculine and the feminine, as exemplified by typical men and women of the twentieth century. Feminist thought attempts to redress the balance of power between the masculine and feminine through reinterpretation of experience that has been codified and transmitted mainly through masculine understanding and values. To quote Gilligan:

The disparity between women's experience and the representation of human development noted throughout the psychological literature, has generally been seen to signify a problem in women's development. Instead, the failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of the human condition, an omission of certain truths about life. (1)

The atmosphere of Hamlet is filled with the influence of the Spirit World, there is more thought, talk, and indirect action than direct action until the end of the play, the
action of the play takes place within the womblike environment of the castle at Elsinore. The female characters in the play manifest the more negative or feared aspects of the feminine with little if any androgenous development, and the male characters are unable to find any equilibrium between the masculine and feminine characteristics that they manifest.

As for Hamlet, he is a man with a deeply split sense of self. As we shall see, he perceives himself as a man, but labels his soul feminine, and appears unable to integrate this duality into a comfortable sense of self, capable of reason, and of the direct expression of feelings and action, while still retaining a capacity for empathy and concern for relationships. He is confronted with a moral dilemma that is impossible to resolve given the nature of his belief system, and yet rather than decide not to decide and therefore withdrawing from the situation entirely, he is drawn to stay and in doing so unhappily is drawn to his fate.

Act I, Scene I of the play opens in darkness, at night, and soon we encounter the world of the spirit, as the ghost makes his first appearance. The awesome world of the Feminine, of the mystery of life and death, confronts us, and we are frightened. Like Horatio, a man of reason, but a man capable of deep friendship and respectful of intuition, we sense that "this bodes some strange eruption to our state."

The contrasting, active, openly aggressive masculine principle makes its first entry in conversation when Horatio describes Fortinbras to the soldiers. Fortinbras hovers in the background throughout the play and takes over the crown at the end, but this play is not about the masculine element, but about the conflictual feminine, the feminine overly active in men, perverted in women, out of balance with any life-restoring masculinity or nurturing femininity. So Fortinbras must stay outside as this action proceeds, serving only as a reminder and a hope.

The ghost makes his entry again and is chased away by two more masculine images - the crowing cock and his implication of impending daylight. But we know that the ghostly departure is temporary, that he is not done with his roaming, that the deathly message that he has to impart demands attendance.

The next scene opens at the court and we meet King Claudius, brother of the deceased King Hamlet, the wandering ghost. Claudius shows himself a skilled diplomat, very much in control of the present situation. He is a gifted speaker, explains himself and his actions poetically, thanks his court, and presumably charms and flatters them rather than commanding their servitude. An exchange occurs between Claudius, Laertes, and Polonius again showing Claudius' persuasive charm and then attention shifts for the first time
to Hamlet.

Hamlet sits at the court dressed in black. Claudius calls him "my cousin Hamlet, and my son - " and does his best to cajole Hamlet into good spirits. But his charm is lost on Hamlet, who makes an aside "A little more than kin and less than kind", which is our first glimpse of his seething, sullen rage.

His mother than begins to plead with Hamlet to cease his mourning. She desperately wants him to join with her, to approve of her actions and the present situation. She pushes him, without ever directly confronting the real problem, and Hamlet responds by warning her that there is more to his grief than the show of mourning: "But I have that within which passeth show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe." We begin to get a sense of some deep split within our hero, as he hints at that which lies within him.

Claudius chides him for his ostentatious grief, calls it unmanly, and for public consumption firmly commands Hamlet to "think of us as of a father". It is safe to assume that this speech is probably for Gertrude's benefit - Claudius is too astute a politician and judge of men to think that Hamlet is going to become more manageable that easily.

Claudius and Gertrude, ask Hamlet not to return to school at Wittenberg but to stay with them. And Hamlet agrees to do so. In the first speeches of the Queen we see a loving mother trying hard to receive her son's acceptance, but in Hamlet's reply he remains aloof:

Queen: Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.  
I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.
Hamlet: I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

Oh, Hamlet, why didn't you go back to Wittenberg? This "obedience" soon to be echoed in Ophelia's betraying obedience to her father, and Gertrude's blind obedience to Claudius, will be Hamlet's ultimate downfall. This is his opportunity to get out of the situation, to avoid the unhealthy environment that prevails. But Hamlet is connected to these people through bonds of rage, and love, and guilt and is not able to truly exert his own will.

Hamlet is then left in the room alone and we hear his first soliloquy in which he speaks of his own suicidal feelings, his grief, and his anger, most particularly at his mother, for marrying his uncle so quickly after his father's death, in fact within a month, and an incestuous union at that.
"Frailty, thy name is woman". He describes the great love that he perceived between his father and mother but comments on his mother's dependency and her sexual needs:
Hamlet: Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him,
   As if increase of appetite had grown
   By what it fed on
But his anger is silent anger: "It is not, nor it cannot come
to good. But break, by heart, for I must hold my tongue."

This last comment is of interest. Why must Hamlet hold his
tongue? There is no evidence yet that he must directly fear
for his life from Claudius, and certainly not from his
mother. Why can he not tell her how he thinks, ask her why
she has done something he considers so horrible? It is
possible that Hamlet cannot talk because he fears that
confronting his mother or Claudius could do harm to the web
of retentions, that surround him. This is the first example
of Hamlet's concern with the maintenance of relationship and
will not be the last. He does not put his own feelings first,
but is bound to be concerned for the feelings of others, even
if he feels hurt himself. He fears his own rage and the
effect any action may have on those around him. He is
confused.

Or is this self-censoring a manifestation of fear — a fear
so deep and pervasive that Hamlet can only talk around it
with his ambivalence. Could he be silent because he fears his
mother, fears her wrath, fears her abandonment, and fears the
power of the feminine within himself? In The Mermaid and The
Minotaur, Dorothy Dinnerstein discusses the difficulty people
have with female power:

The crucial psychological fact is that all of us, female
as well as male, fear the will of woman. Man's dominion
over what we think of as the world rests on a terror
that we all feel: the terror of sinking back wholly into
the helplessness of infancy. As the folk saying insists,
there is another realm that interpenetrates all too
intimately with what is formally recognized as the
world: a realm already ruled, despotically enough, by
the hand that rocks the cradle.

Female will is embedded in female power, which is under
present conditions the earliest and profoundest
prototype of absolute power. It emanates, at the outset,
from a boundless, all-embracing presence. We live by its
grace while our lives are most fragile. We grow human
within its aura. Its reign is total, all-pervasive,
throughout our most vulnerable, our most fateful
impressionable years. Power of this kind, concentrated
in one sex and exerted at the outset over both, is far
too potent and dangerous a force to be allowed free sway
in adult life. To contain it, to keep it under control
and harness it to chosen purposes, is a vital need, a
vital task for every mother-raised human. (2)
Hamlet's whole speech has an angry tone, anger directed inwardly more than outwardly, as typified by its talk of suicide and melancholy:

Hamlet: O! that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
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.

Let us pause for a moment and look at Hamlet's melancholy, expressed so meaningfully in several of his speeches. Phyllis Chesler in her book, Women and Madness, has a great deal to say about the historical and present tendency for women to become depressed and melancholic expressing a "harsh, self-critical, self-depriving and often self-destructive set of attitudes". (3) It has long been known that males most often tend to act out aggressively towards others and females most often act out aggressively towards themselves. As Chesler states:

Traditionally depression has been conceived of as the response to - or expression of - loss, either of an ambivalently loved other, of the "ideal" self, or of meaning in one's life. The hostility that should or could be directed outward in response to loss is turned inwards toward the self. "Depression" rather than "aggression" is the female response to disappointment and loss.

It is important to note that "depressed" women are (like women in general) only verbally hostile; unlike most men, they do not express their hostility physically - either directly, to the "significant others" in their lives, or indirectly, through physical and athletic prowess. It is safer for women to become "depressed" than physically violent. (4)

As the play opens Hamlet has suffered not only the loss of his father, but also the idealized images of his mother and his parents' marital union. As the play progresses he loses his role as a scholar, his love for Ophelia, even his sense of stability in a world invaded by spirits. And then he discovers that there is great substance to his rage - murder. But more characteristic of women, Hamlet becomes depressed, withdrawn, verbally hostile, and filled with self-contempt, voicing openly his self-destructive feelings. Part of his melancholy may also be linked to ambivalent feelings about his father how he has clearly idealized:
Hamlet: So excellent a king; that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not betwixt the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly.

and

A was a man. Take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again."

This, in spite of the fact that the ghost himself has told us
that he is suffering in purgatory for his "foul crimes" After
all, Hamlet certainly does not take after his warrior father
- he is instead a scholar, gentle, given to words, not
action, a lover of the theater, not the battlefield. He
idealizes his father, but we have little indication that he
identifies with him. His father is as much like his brother
Claudius as Hamlet is to Hercules, and one wonders if the
comparison Hamlet secretly made was between his Herculean
father and himself. By nature Hamlet actually seems more like
his father's brother Claudius, who is also a skilled and
verbally agile diplomat.

But there are strong indications that Hamlet did identify
strongly with his mother. He is not effeminate but his
tendency to regress into melancholy rather than taking direct
action, his concern for relationships, his verbal agility and
tendency to express hostility verbally, his indirect methods
of obtaining information, his remarkable facility and
dexterity in relationships, his difficulty in seeing moral
solutions as black and white, the degree of intimacy between
he and his mother, his interest in and tendency to use the
more histrionic styles of delivery, his well developed sense
of intuition, and his capacity to relate and express himself
on a deep emotional level all indicate a close identification
with his mother. So also does his passivity, his reluctance
to take action, his dependency.

The first exchange between Hamlet and Horatio is a gentle
one, demonstrating the depth of the friendship and the ease
they experience with each other. When Hamlet hears about his
father's ghost he swears he will speak to him if he appears
again. His speech indicates that Hamlet does not lack
courage, he is not a man totally guided by fear:

If it assume my noble father's person
I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace.

At the end of this scene we begin to develop an appreciation
of Hamlet's intuitive powers and his second reference to his
sense of an inner self:

My father's spirit in arms! All is not well.
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come.
Till then, sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

Here is an early indicator of Hamlet's reluctance to act for
the sake of action. He counsels himself to keep still, to
wait for Fate to unfold her plan. There is here a deeply
feminine sense of process, a recognition that man's control
over nature is illusory.

In Act I, Scene III we see the contrast between Hamlet and
Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia. It is easier to understand
why Hamlet would have such a dislike for Polonius than it is
to understand how he could love a woman like Ophelia. She
patiently listens to her brother's condescending speech,
accepts her father's condemnation of Hamlet, the man she
supposedly loves, and obediently agrees to stop accepting
Hamlet's favors. She appears to be totally dependent on the
male members of her family, with no will, thoughts, or
conscience of her own. Neither Polonius or Laertes appear
the least concerned about how their pronouncements affect
Ophelia, nor do they take the time to ask her how she feels.
It is as if she were a possession, a doll, a pet, whose sole
purpose is to do as she is bid. Ophelia's passivity and
obedience illustrate the feminine in its more negative side
and as the plot moves along we will see how this
furthers the cause of evil.

In Scene IV, Hamlet sees the ghost of his father for the
first time. Hamlet is not afraid; it is not cowardice that
explains his future inability to act.

Hamlet: Why, what should be the fear?
    I do not set my life at a pin's fee;
    And for my soul, what can it do to that,
    Being a thing immortal as itself?

And again, the mention of his soul, as immortal and to be
differentiated from his life.

Scene V, the last of Act I, is perhaps the most moving part
of the play. In it, the Ghost speaks to Hamlet and tells him
the story of his murder. Before he tells the tale Hamlet is
full and ready for revenge of "murder most foul":

Hamlet: Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
    As meditation of the thoughts of love,
    May sweep to my revenge.

Then the Ghost sets before Hamlet an impossible task: to
revenge his father's murder:
Ghost: If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
    Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
    A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursu'st this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

It is of note that the ghost does not tell Hamlet to murder his uncle, only to prevent incest and not harm his mother. After hearing this speech, Hamlet is quite obviously, and understandably, upset. His grief and anguish are palpable, his anger at his mother and his uncle clearly evident, "O most pernicious woman! O villain, villain, smiling damned villain! He struggles to understand; to help organize his thoughts he writes them down on his tablets; he distractedly replies to his friends' questions and obviously wants to get away from them.

Hamlet is caught on the horns of a terrible dilemma. Justice demands that he avenge his father's death with the death of his uncle, but if he does so, he breaks faith with his mother, himself, and his God. Hamlet is clearly guided by a moral injunction that cannot be readily imbibed in the notion of masculine vengeance and honor. Women have long been thought to be inadequate in their sense of conscience, in their ambivalence about defining justice within relationships. Freud said that "for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men." He concluded that women "show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility." (5)

Janet Lever decided to study children's games since it is through play that children learn to take the role of the other and how to handle rules. There were differences between the play of boys and the play of girls. "during the course of this study, boys were seen quarrelling all the time, but not once was a game terminated because of a quarrel and no game was interrupted for more than seven minutes... In fact, it seemed that the boys enjoyed the legal debates as much as they did the game itself, ... In contrast the eruption of disputes among girls tended to end the game." Piaget found boys becoming increasingly fascinated with the legal elaboration of rules and the development of fair procedures for adjudicating conflicts. Girls were shown to be much more tolerant towards rules, more willing to make exceptions, and more easily reconciled to innovations. Boys' games were also much more concerned with competition than girls' games. Girls were more likely to play games where there were no winners or losers. Girls consistently ended games when quarrels broke out, thus subordinating the rules of any game to the maintenance of relationship. (6)

If an action is seen by women as a potential, possibly
permanent disruptor of a relationship, or of her responsibility to care for others, then she will be extremely ambivalent about pursuing that course of action. As Gilligan states:

But just as the conventions that shape women's moral judgment differ from those that apply to men, so also women's definition of the moral domain diverges from that derived from studies of men. Women's construction of the moral problem as a problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than as one of rights and rules ties the development of their moral thinking to changes in their understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as justice ties development to the logic of equality and reciprocity. Thus the logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach. ..... The inflicting of hurt is considered selfish and immoral in its reflection of unconcern, while the expression of care is seen as the fulfillment of moral responsibility. (7)

Thus a progressively more adequate understanding of the psychology of human relationships - an increasing differentiation of self and other and a growing comprehension of the dynamics of social interaction - informs the development of an ethic of care. This ethic, which reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent. ..... the fact of interconnection informs the central, recurring recognition that just as the incidence of violence is in the end destructive to all, so the activity of care enhances both others and self. (8)

Hamlet is extremely conflicted over his sense of justice. Unlike Laertes, he does not automatically know how to respond. Is the ghost telling the truth? How can he kill and damn his soul? How can he kill Claudius without harming his mother? How can he avoid tainting his own mind? How can he condemn another without examining his own motivations? What is his responsibility in a situation of conflicting and mutually exclusive responsibilities?

This ability to look at the grays of life, to weigh each point of view and see merit in all is a more typically feminine than masculine style of establishing a standard of justice. For the feminine the question becomes not so much a question of who is right and who wrong, but how can each party's needs be met?
And as is clear in the outcome, violence is in the end destructive to all and Hamlet knows this, knows early on that there is no way to avoid a tragic outcome.

Horatio appears to bring his friend out of his reverie and Hamlet focuses on the present again:

Horatio: There's no offence, my lord.
Hamlet: Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio, And much offence, too. Touching this vision here It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you;

Why "by Saint Patrick"? The only reference that seemed applicable comes from The Golden Legend, a medieval text by Jacob de Voragine:

He then went to preach in Ireland, but his preaching bore little fruit. Therefore Saint Patrick implored God to reveal Himself to the Irish by some sign which would strike terror into their hearts, and lead them to repentance. Then, at God's command, he traced a wide circle with his staff, and a very deep pit opened within it. And it was revealed to Patrick that the pit was the opening to a purgatory, and that those who chose to go down into it could expiate their sins therein, and would be spared their purgatory after death; but also that most of those who entered the pit would never come out again, and that those who would come out would have remained in the purgatory from one morning to the next. And a few persons went down into the pit, and, in very deed, never came out again. (9)

The ghost has risen from purgatory to appear to Hamlet, now Hamlet stands on the edge of the pit, compelled by the ghost of his father to seek revenge for his murder, but in so seeking, Hamlet risks his own immortal soul. Masculine justice demands that he sacrifice his feminine soul, like Jepthah to whom he compares Polonius. He has been told to seek revenge and yet he must not harm his mother. And he has been instructed to do all this by a Spirit who admits he comes from "sulphurous and tormenting flames... confined to fast in fires, Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purg'd away" who at the same time implies that Hamlet must commit murder himself to avenge his father's death.

Further on in the story of Saint Patrick is the story of a nobleman named Nicholas, who had been guilty of many sins and wanted to do penance by going down into the saint's purgatory and there was tempted and tormented by demons and only won his way to earth by resisting all temptation. Is the spirit his father's ghost or is it a demon come to tempt Hamlet to lose his soul? Is it any wonder he has
difficulty taking action?

In the rest of the scene Hamlet appears to compose himself and begins to devise a plan. He swears his companions to secrecy and warns them that he will appear mad at times by assuming an "antic disposition", and that they are to tell nothing of what they have seen. But why must he feign madness? Why hide behind an "antic disposition"? Perhaps because madness has long been a way of presenting the truth that people do not want to hear while discounting it at the same time. What the Fool does through his use of humor, the madman can do through his crazy ironies and double-edged metaphor. But like the Fool, like Woman, the Madman (or Madwoman) wields no power, at best is a gadfly, at worst a dangerous nuisance.

From the outset we know that dark feminine forces are at work, "something is rotten in the state of Denmark". By the end of the first act we have encountered Gertrude and her sin. The corruption already has centered on her, the emphasis more on her betraying sexuality than Claudius' murderous actions. And we have been faced with the ghost's instructions to Hamlet - to avenge his death without contriving against his mother or tainting his own mind.

Hamlet now knows that he has been chosen, that this is a part of his destiny that he can not avoid, but would not have elected for himself. Hamlet, the unlikely and unwilling Christ figure in a most unholy family, with a murdered ghostly father, an incestuous mother, and a demonic uncle.

Hamlet: The time is out of joint; O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!

Act II, Scene I opens with Polonius, like a gossipy, mean old biddy, laying a trap to obtain information about his own son. Hamlet may be morally overburdened, Polonius seems to follow no particular moral belief system at all. He spies on his son, betrays his daughter, and appears to lack any concern for either of them except as objects he can manipulate to suit his own ends. Ophelia comes in and tells him about a meeting with Hamlet in which he appeared quite distraught, spoke not a word, but with heavy sighs, withdrew from her. Polonius assumes that Hamlet is "Mad for thy love", and shows a little caring at least when he urges Ophelia to go with him to the king: "This must be known; which, being kept close, might move more grief to hide than hate to utter love."

In Scene II. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet with the King and Queen who solicit their help in getting to the bottom of Hamlet's apparent madness. The King appears concerned and the Queen is sincerely worried about her son. Polonius enters and
tells the King he thinks he knows what is wrong with Hamlet. Before hearing the reason, Gertrude sites her own reason:

Gertrude: I doubt it is no other but the main
His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage.

Gertrude is astute - she knows the truth, her intuition accurate and acute, but in her dependency, subservience and guilt, she consistently throws the truth aside, giving way always to Claudius' version of reality. She knows her son, knows his sensitivity, but has done nothing to abate his distress.

Polonius reads Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia to the court, and makes the case for Hamlet's lovesickness as a result of his urging that Ophelia reject Hamlet:

Polonius: And then prescripts I gave her,
That she should lock herself from his resort,
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.
Which done, she took the fruits of my advice;
And he repulsed, - a short tale to make,-
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Then to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness; and by this declension
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we mourn for.

Then the King and Polonius plot to catch Hamlet with Ophelia and see for themselves if this is not the cause of Hamlet's distress. Gertrude, like Ophelia, goes along with this invasion of Hamlet's feelings. These two woman, the two who should be most sensitive to him, who should be most eager to defend his integrity, willingly submit to their husband and father's dubious motives, and allow Hamlet to be spied on and betrayed.

This is an example of the imbalance, the corruption, in the family and in the state. Gertrude and Ophelia are the only female representatives in the play, other than the Player Queen who is actually a man playing at being a woman. Throughout the play, it is clear that Gertrude's adultery and incestuous sexuality is more at fault for the situation than even the murdering Claudius. The focus is on Gertrude's moral flaw, echoed in the condemnation of Ophelia. Both represent examples of the destruction that ensues when woman's embodiment of the ethic of care as a moral responsibility is rendered powerless and ineffectual. The positive aspect of the feminine is nurturing and protective. When that protection is inhibited for some reason, the child, the family, and the nation are left exposed and endangered, vulnerable to the negative, unconscious aspects of the feminine and the negative, violent aspects of the masculine.
Gertrude is portrayed as a woman undeveloped. What Hamlet sees as the former intense love for his father could just as easily be portrayed as intense dependency. Certainly, her rapid shift of allegiance from one King to the next, and her continuing need to bend to his wishes and judgment despite her own contradictory knowledge, indicates the lack of any individuated self. She is not a mature woman, but more a little girl in relation to her husband and is therefore unable to supply the continued nurturing and protectiveness that her son requires.

Out of her own selfishness, and the desire to gratify her own needs, whether they be sexual or dependent, she has set up a situation that is extremely dangerous, psychologically and ultimately physically, for her own and only son. This is motherhood turned indirectly murderous. She is clearly conflicted in that she obviously loves Hamlet and cares for him, but unconsciously sets the stage for his destruction. Her own healthy sense of autonomy and assertiveness has been repressed and totally denied and she can not promote such growth in her only child who is closely identified with her. Instead, these forces turn on her and her son leading to both of their destructions.

H.G. Lerner, in *Women in Therapy* speaks directly about the deficiencies in Gertrude and in Ophelia:

One dilemma that the girl faces in identifying with her mother is that she is confronted with an internalized maternal imago that includes elements of the bad, omnipotent, destructive mother. To avoid such a fearful identification, the girl/woman may defensively shift to a self-experience of being castrated and reassuringly helpless. This self-experience, and the related idealization of men, frequently masks its opposite — a self-experience of being destructive and castrating, especially in relationship to men.

In addition, women's primitive fears about their own destructiveness are profoundly reinforced by cultural stereotypes that teach women to "play dumb", "let the man win", "pretend he's boss", or any variety of maneuvers that encourage women to feign weakness when it does not come naturally. These cultural teachings are paradoxical warnings of how hurtful and destructive the "weaker sex" might be to men if women were simply to be themselves. (10)

Ophelia is a younger version of Gertrude. This is probably why Gertrude would approve of her as a wife for Hamlet, even though the knowledgeable Polonius rules this match out as inappropriate for a prince. She too has an undeveloped sense of self. She is subservient to father and brother, betrays the man she loves without even an argument, willingly allows
herself to be used as a tool for her father's and the King's ends, contributes to her father's death by refusing to make any positive move toward active goodness that could have helped Hamlet, and ultimately can only speak up under the shield of madness, turning her anger onto herself, helping to precipitate a destructive end for her brother and Hamlet.

Hamlet and Polonius meet and Hamlet demonstrates his superior verbal hostility, thinly disguised as madness. And then Hamlet meets his old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At first Hamlet is open and expressive with them, saying tellingly:

Hamlet: Denmark's a prison
Rosen.: The is the world one.
Hamlet: A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

and then also revealing:

Hamlet: O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.
Guilde: Which dreams, indeed, are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.
Hamlet: A dream itself is but a shadow.

These two brief comments give a good impression of Hamlet's mental state at this time. He is imprisoned in his own mind, caught between two conflicting and irreconcilable moral imperatives. He must revenge his father's murder, bring no harm to his mother, and not break his own longstanding moral and religious codes. We know that months have elapsed since the ghost has appeared and he has done nothing except appear mad to those around him. His "male" self says he must kill Claudius to avenge his father, his "female" soul says that such an action would be an unforgivable sin, a crime against his mother and his God. He is still not convinced that the ghost was truly his father's spirit. He fears that his own hatred and jealousy for Claudius may contaminate his actions without more proof. He thus, cannot move, locked in a prison not of his own making, waiting for Fate to bring about some resolution.

He questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as to their appearance at this particular time and their hesitation leads Hamlet rapidly to recognize, that these two former friends are now agents of the King, and no longer friends of his. For their benefit then, he goes into a lengthy presentation of his recent symptoms, part of which we can believe he really feels, part is acting, the setting of the stage:
Hamlet: I have of late, - but wherefore I know not, -
lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of
exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my
disposition that this goodly frame, the earth,
seems to me a sterile promontory; this most
excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave
o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof
fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no
other thing to me but a foul and pestilent
congregation of vapours.

And then such impressive histrionics, because how could we
expect him to feel this sincerely now, after every person
except Horatio has betrayed him?

Hamlet: What a piece of work is a man! How noble in
reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in
moving, how express and admirable! in action how
like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!
the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!
And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of
dust? man delights not me; no, nor woman
neither, though by your smiling you seem to say
so.

Before the players enter Hamlet and Polonius again have a
brief dialogue in which Hamlet calls Polonius, Jephthah,
indicating his sure knowledge that Polonius has sacrificed
Ophelia to serve his own ends, making more understandable
Hamlet's vehement dislike for the old codger. In the Biblical
passage, Jephthah is a Godly man because he pledges to
sacrifice his daughter if God saves him, and when God
obliges, he does in fact, sacrifice his daughter. The
daughter, by the way, goes willingly to the slaughter. This
is not a woman's story. Sacrificing one's child for the whim
of a God is simply not seen as morally responsible in a
feminine ethic of care. And Hamlet, in throwing this story at
Polonius, clearly sees no ideal in Jephthah.

Hamlet greets the players and appears to know them well. He
asks them for a scene from Aeneas' tale to Dido about the
bloody killing of Priam at the hands of Pyrrhus, out to
avenge his father, and the grief of Hecuba his widow. The
noble Priam, the violent, vengeful Pyrrhus, and the anguished
Hecuba all serve as dramatic contrasts to Claudius, Hamlet,
and Gertrude and in hearing the tale, Hamlet pours salt onto
his wounds, knowing full well what he is doing to himself:

Hamlet: O! What a rogue and peasant slave am I:
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her?

He compares himself unfavorably to the actor only playing a
part when he has the real circumstances to react to and
cannot do so. He calls himself coward that he has not yet
killed the "bloody, bawdy villain" and compares himself to:

Hamlet: Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab
A scullion!

Here he deliberately calls himself a woman, a whore, a female
servant, and it is the woman within who uses words and not
action. But then, he plans his next course -to "catch the
conscience of the king" by means of a play - ironically
through words again, because in fact, Hamlet is a man of
words and reason, not action. He is not totally convinced
that the ghost was not a manifestation of evil come abroad to
play upon Hamlet's own perceived faults

Hamlet: The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy -
As he is very potent with such spirits -
Abuses me to damn me."

And again, we see his hesitation about his revenge. He wants
to be more sure that his uncle is in fact guilty, and wants
his uncle to betray himself and states that "if he but blench
I know my course" - we will see about that. For Hamlet, words
have great power, and it is through the actor's words that he
hopes to assess the King's guilt, and determine his own
course of action.

Hamlet knows there is a great deal at stake. This is not the
time for impulsive action when Claudius' guilt is not
established. Like the play-acting of his "antic disposition",
the play serves to elicit the truth without responsibility.
This referenve to the world of appearances of "seems" is a
repeated image throughout the play, associated with the mask
of cosmetics women wear to cover the corruption that lies
beneath, just as the play is a facade that covers the
corruption in the state. Women are false, a play is a false
mirror of reality and concretely, the female players are
false women because they are actually men. The image serves
to point again and again to the essential falseness in
Gertrude and in Ophelia who betray their feminine power and
duty.
In the beginning of Act III, Scene I, Polonius, the King, Gertrude, and Ophelia arrange for Polonius and the King to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia to see if he is truly lovesick, as Polonius suggests. Both Gertrude and Ophelia go along with this deception, ostensibly for Hamlet's benefit:

Queen: (to King) I shall obey you. And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish That your good beauties be the happy cause Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues Will bring him to his wonted way again, To both your honours,
Ophelia: Madam, I wish it may.

The King has a short burst of conscience and the image of the whore recurs, as the false woman:

King: (Aside) O! 'tis too true; How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience! The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art, Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it Than is my deed to my most painted work: O heavy burden!

The theme of the false woman, who uses cosmetics to cover her ugliness, is a recurring theme throughout the play. The image serves to point again and again to the essential falseness in Gertrude, and in Ophelia, who betray their feminine power.

And then Hamlet enters with his famous fourth soliloquy. Should he kill the King, or should he not? He equates revenge with his own death and then recognizes his fear of death and what lies after, particularly if he has committed mortal sins. Here we see a mind in dreadful conflict, obsessively ruminating, trying to find an answer to a question that is unanswerable. There is no way out of this dilemma that leads to life, comfort, or redemption, but Hamlet's mind keeps searching for such a solution. In doing so, he condemns himself as a coward:

Hamlet: Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought And enterprises of great pitch and moment With this regard their currents turn awry, And lose the name of action.

Hamlet then sees Ophelia. We must remember that she has been rejecting his suit without explanation, that he knows that she has been put up to this behavior by her father, that she is the only other representative of womanhood besides his
mother and she too has betrayed him. He indirectly confronts her with her lack of honesty and contrasts this with her beauty which speech itself contrasts with his mother's words to Ophelia minutes before:

Hamlet: That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

Ophelia: Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

Hamlet: Ay, truly; 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 sometime a paradox, but the time gives it proof. I did love you once.

But Ophelia just verbally fences with him; she still cannot be honest with him and his anger and hurt with her and disillusionment with himself increases, while at the same time he seems to be trying to protect her by warning her to stay away from men such as he:

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father?

This last sentence seems a non sequitur and probably indicates some missing stage direction showing that Hamlet notices that he is being spied upon because the tone of the conversation changes. Hamlet becomes more aggressive and appears to be playing to an audience:

Hamlet: Or is thou wilt needs marry
marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go and quickly too. Farewell.

Ophelia: O! heavenly powers, restore him!

Hamlet: I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jig, you amble, you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no
more on't: it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages; those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunery, go.

Ophelia's speech describes her perception of Hamlet before this all began but it also indicates what a ninny she is. She is saddened by Hamlet's present decline, but apparently sees no connection between her own behavior and his, and is totally unaware of what may be so disturbing to him. All she seems capable of is description—there is no indication that she even has the capacity for thought. She is a stereotype of femininity: beauty, no brains; feelings, no thoughts. If she cannot respond to Hamlet's provocation now, she never will. But she cannot respond with anger or even righteous indignation. Anger would constitute a declaration of independence, the voice of an autonomous self. But Ophelia has no identity separate from her father and brother. Ophelia is identified with passivity and helplessness. She is a born victim.

In order to understand the dynamics of women who characteristically become "hurt" in situations that might more realistically evoke anger, a distinction must be made between the phenomenology of anger and of hurt. It is important to appreciate that the experience of anger is one that involves the feeling of being separate, different, and alone. Any angry confrontation is a statement of differences between people, which elicits a heightened sense of standing on one's own two feet, separate and apart from a relational context. In the midst of an angry confrontation, a woman no longer feels like the wife of her husband, the daughter of her mother, or the mother of her child. She is herself, separate and alone. Bernardz-Bonesatti has noted that "in anger, the person establishes automatic aloneness and makes herself temporarily separate from the object of the anger." She writes that women are so afraid of this loss of connection that their expressions of anger are frequently accompanied by tears, guilt, sorrow, which contaminate the anger or serve to nullify it entirely. (11)

The King, on the other hand, is quite capable of sophisticated thought and increasingly realizes that Hamlet is a danger, that he is not as crazy as he seems. In his muddle-headed way, Polonius remains convinced that Ophelia is the problem and urges a meeting between Hamlet and his mother that Polonius will observe in secret.

In Scene II, Hamlet gives his famous advice to the players. Too bad he could not take his own advice in life:

Hamlet: Be not too tame neither, but let your own
discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the
word, the word to the action; with this special
observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of
nature

And then, he greets Horatio and declares, passionately, his
friendship:

Hamlet: Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Has ta'en with equal thanks; and bless'd are
those
Whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

Hamlet has described a balanced man, capable of passion but
not 'passion's slave, a man of reason and a man of will who
does not just respond to the demands of Fate, the man he
wants to be and cannot be. Horatio represents a contrast to
Fortinbras. Both hover in the background of the play, and
both survive the destruction at the end. Fortinbras
represents the raw masculine, but Horatio is the only example
in the play of the integrated, individuated man, capable of
exercising control over and deriving comfort from, both
sides of his personality.

There is more sincere love and respect in this one speech to
Horatio than anything that passes for affection between
Hamlet and Ophelia. Was Hamlet really homosexual, given all
his negative comments about the women and female sexuality
and obvious love for Horatio? Or are these the somewhat
desperate comments of a man, betrayed by everyone but
Horatio, overwhelmingly appreciative that at least one
individual has proved true? Hamlet's feminine soul longs to
be joined with just such a man.

The play is set to begin. Hamlet rejects his mother's offer
to sit with her and instead seats himself at Ophelia's feet
and proceeds to insult Polonius and then Ophelia, as if to
prove to all that he is mad, and that he is not mad for
Ophelia. He is very provocative towards her, but as usual
she, cowlike, makes to attempt to speak for herself.

Tension rises as the dumbshow begins, followed by the play
itself. Hamlet excitedly watches the King flee the scene, but
we know his victory is one of word, not deed. Hamlet has, in
fact, left himself terribly exposed. He has finally acted,
but his acting has been just acting, with no consequence except to assure him of the King's guilt, and to fully alert the King that Hamlet knows his awful secret. He has caught the conscience of the King, but the King himself will not be caught without a fight. Hamlet has put himself in great danger, but does not seem to care. This is the closest we see to real madness - with the King, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with Polonius - he throws caution to the wind. He is exhausted with his own obsessive rumination and now will seize on any action, just to put an end to deliberation and melancholy despair:

Hamlet: 'Tis now the very witching time of night,
    When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
    Contagion to the world: now could I drink hot blood,
    And do such bitter business as the day
    Would quake to look on. Soft! not to my mother
    O heart! lose not thy nature; let not ever
    The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;
    Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
    I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
    My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;
    How in my words soever she be shent,
    To give them seals never, my soul, consent!

Finally, our Hamlet is aroused; finally he is justifiably angry. Sure knowledge of Claudius' guilt and therefore the ghost's authenticity has helped him overcome his chronic ambivalence. But he fears his anger, fears his capacity to be overwhelmed and cautions his soul to protect him from it. But is he really in danger of losing control and killing his mother from what we know of him? Or is this an expression of a fear and a wish, a recognition of the truth of what the Player Queen has voiced:

P. Queen: For women's fear and love hold quantity,
    In neither aught, or in extremity.
    Now, what my love is, proof hath made you know;
    And as my love is siz'd, my fear is so.
    Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;
    Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.

One of the puzzling parts of Hamlet's character is why he is so reluctant to directly express his anger to anyone? It is clearly not just objective fear for his life because he leaves hints around everywhere for Claudius to pick up and which endanger him. He is indirect and roundabout with everyone except Horatio. This is much more characteristic of the typical female approach to aggression than the male. As
we see as the play unfolds, Hamlet has in common with his mother and Ophelia a difficulty in expressing anger directly, in responding to provocation with action, in assuming any position of power. But why?

H.G. Lerner, in *Women in Therapy*, makes some interesting assertions that bear on this question:

Women's difficulties with anger have been conceptualized by feminist writers as a consequence of the feminine socialization process. Clinical and research evidence does, in fact, indicate that girls are raised in a manner that restricts their freedom to express anger and aggression and inhibits their capacity for competitive and self-assertive behavior. But why have such cultural pressures been established and maintained? The myth of the feminine woman as devoid of anger and aggressiveness could not have so vigorously survived over the ages unless both sexes shared deep intrapsychic fears of female anger. (12)

And Dinnerstein adds:

Female sentience... needs to be corralled, controlled, not only because its boundaries are unclear but also because its wrath is all-potent and the riches it can offer or refuse us are bottomless. What makes female intentionality so formidable - so terrifying and at the same time so alluring - is the mother's life-and-death control over helpless infancy. [What is also formidable...] is the mother's power to foster or forbid, to humble or respect, our first steps toward autonomous activity. (13)

Does any of this theory help to clarify Hamlet's motivation as well that of as Gertrude and Ophelia? Hamlet has not yet adequately developed a sense of autonomy. The grave scene later in the play would place him at about the age of thirty, but other indicators in the play - the fact that he is a student and did not assume the crown - would place him more in adolescence or nearly manhood. His state of maturity seems more adolescent than adult - he has not yet established a family of his own, a home of his own, a status of his own. He has idealized his deceased father and has identified with his mother as her only child, presumably pampered and indulged, judging by her attitude towards him now. She is a woman clearly uncomfortable with assertiveness or autonomy, dependent on men, evidencing no show of overt anger. But she is also a woman capable of deceit and falseness as evidenced by her adultery and eagerness to enter an incestuous relationship. Hamlet repeatedly evokes the image of this more unconscious image of his mother in his various defamatory comments about her and women in general,
while he himself plays false through the performance, false by omission, false through madness, false to all those he feels have betrayed him. He consciously identifies his soul as feminine. Hamlet has an awareness of his mother's destructive capacity — both imagined and real, and given his close identification with her, must also fear the same within himself.

As a consequence, he must repeatedly rein in his appropriate anger, dealing with it through innuendo, indirect action, verbal hostility, double entendres, feigned madness, and histrionic outbursts. In reality he is in a position of power to inflict great harm upon his nation because of is position as a representative of the ruling family. Psychologically he has an overwhelming fear of his own anger that he directs primarily at himself, at least in the early stages of the play.

Dinnerstein addresses this sense of deep-seated rage:

In this challenge [of developing a self] there is an inevitable strain of vindictiveness: to insist on the validity of our own perspective, of our own feelings, we must vent the rage that we feel in the face of early parental power. And under present conditions, the vindictiveness does not have to be — and therefore typically never is — outgrown. If we are men, we are invited by the world's ways to express it directly, in arrogance toward everything female. If we are women, we are encouraged to express it both directly and indirectly: directly in distrust and disrespect toward other women, and indirectly by offering ourselves up to male vindictiveness, the satisfaction of which we can then vicariously share. In either case, we go on all our lives asserting ourselves against the first parent — with a vengeance. (14)

Based on his identification with his mother, there is also a clear concern with and expertise in relationships that we have discussed earlier. This dependence on relationships combined with his lack of established autonomy also makes anger threatening because of its potentially devastating sense of aloneness which inevitably follows the direct expression of anger. We must not forget that Hamlet is a young man who has lost his father, whose uncle, mother, girlfriend, and boyhood friends have betrayed him, and who is now left with one solitary friend, Horatio, whose presence is only temporary and a relationship with a ghost on leave from Purgatory. He is bound to be fearful of any further severing of the fractured ties he has left.

In Scene III, the King admits his crimes and tries to pray for forgiveness, but he cannot give up "the wicked prize" and therefore cannot truly repent. He is a man honest with
himself, choosing to do wrong without justification or rationalization, so at least we can admire him for his lack of hypocrisy. Claudius is not portrayed initially as an evil man. He truly appears to love Gertrude. Before he senses the threat he even seems concerned for Hamlet's well-being. He is an excellent politician who is able to save the state from a potentially devastating onslaught by Fortinbras. There are indications that the people themselves have supported his assumption of the crown. Had he not given in to corruption he may have been an excellent king. But he was tempted to adultery, to murder, to incest, and he succumbed and now has too much revel in the victories to seek redemption. Instead, he chooses evil and from this point on his character degenerates.

What would have happened had Gertrude been able to exert a more powerful influence for good? The responsibility for the corruption in the play is placed at Gertrude's feet because woman are seen as being responsible for upholding the "ethics of care" by maintaining the sanctity of the marital bond, by offering continuing protection and nurturance for children, and by taking responsibility for the safe maintenance of all vital relationships.

In her work, Chodorow has attributed gender differences in the evolution of a sense of moral priorities to women's responsibility for child rearing and has explored this concept in depth. She reasons that since the primary caretaker for most children is female, that male and female gender identity formation must take different paths to completion. Female identity formation occurs in the context of a continuing relationship, whereas male identity formation requires the severing of a vital relationship attachment with mother. There are profound consequences to this development:

Girls emerge from this period with a basis for "empathy" built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own (or of thinking that one is so experiencing another's needs and feelings). Furthermore, girls do not define themselves in terms of the denial of preoedipal relationship modes to the same extent as do boys. Therefore, regression to these modes tends not to feel as much a basic threat to their ego. From very early, then, because they are parented by a person of the same gender... girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well. (15)

As a result of these differences, relationships are experienced differently by men and by women:
For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. Thus males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation. (16)

Gertrude has betrayed her husband, has betrayed her son, and will ultimately cause the destruction of Claudius by her own death. She is assumed to have the decisive power for destruction in the play, shared to some degree by her mirror-self, Ophelia. But her power remains unconscious, inaccessible to change, acted-out by the men in her life. Unconsciously she represents the destructive feminine life-force, the witch, Circe, Lilith, Hecate.

Hamlet represents the Renaissance ideal of the balanced man, "O! what a noble mind... the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword; the expectancy and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion of the mould of form, the observ'd of all observers", except for his fatal flaw - his fear of women and his consequent inability to integrate his own female "soul" into his native maleness. Even his father the ghost, fears Gertrude, why else warn Hamlet not to harm her but to leave her to God? Men - and the world they rule - are safe when they kill each other, but the world is endangered if they begin killing mothers.

Hamlet cannot yet kill Claudius because he doesn't really want to do so. He has the opportunity in this scene and ostensibly refuses to do so because the King is at his prayers, but in fact, it is Gertrude he wants to see. Gertrude who is waiting for him, Gertrude upon whom he wants to vent his rage, despite what his father has urged. Hamlet is wise enough to know that his real conflict lies not with his murdering uncle - he will shortly become a murderer himself, as was his father still serving time in Purgatory. His battle lies with his mother and wresting some power away from her without destroying her and himself in the process.

Hamlet begins to claim his manhood when he stops his mother from running away and forces her to stay and confront his accusations. This is arguably, Hamlet's first direct and assertive action:

\[\text{Hamlet: Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge}\]
You go not, till I set up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

Queen: What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?

It is interesting that as Hamlet "sets up a glass" she sees the potential for murder, as they reflect each other in their eyes. Now Hamlet can kill the "wretched, rash, intruding fool" with no complicated hesitation or rumination. His will is no longer paralyzed, he acts. In direct confrontation with his mother, his own masculinity asserts itself without compunction. He then faces Gertrude with her own misdeeds, confronting her with his own disgust and shame for her. As he does so, she begins to see herself through his eyes:

Queen: O Hamlet! Speak no more;
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

But Hamlet goes on, verbally pressing his assault until he is stopped by the ghost who reminds Hamlet that this is not his mission, but just the appetizer:

Ghost: Do not forget: this visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
But, look! amazement on thy mother sits;
O! step between her and her fighting soul;
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works

The ghost's continued concern for Gertrude is interesting. If we assume that his purpose is not a malignant one, but that he is to serve as the agent that inspires and directs Hamlet to end the corruption in the state, then we must assume that he recognizes that matricide would be fatal for any integration of Hamlet's self, that it would, for Hamlet lead inevitably to the suicide he has hinted at.

As a consequence of the ghost's warning, Hamlet calms down and becomes more deliberate and sternly instructive towards his mother. For her part, the whole experience has been regenerative - she has looked at her own unconscious evil and has taken responsibility for it:

Queen: Be thou assur'd, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breath
What thou hast said to me

A change has occurred in Hamlet. He has confronted his own rage and has discovered that he can control himself. He has faced the fearful feminine and has found submission and apology. His mother has confronted her own negativity and has vowed to support his plight. He knows that he is headed for trouble in England but appears prepared to actively
confront it. We know, however, because Hamlet has told us that there is to be no happy ending for our hero because he, too, has committed unsanctioned murder in killing the wrong man:

Hamlet: For this same lord,
    I do repent: but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
    To punish me with this, and this with me
    That I must be their scourge and minister.
    I will bestow him, and will answer well
    The death I gave him, So again, good-night
    The death I gave him, So again, good-night
    I must be cruel only to be kind:
    Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.

Act IV, Scene I opens with the King and Queen in dialogue, the Queen carrying out Hamlet's instructions to present him as mad, and thus explain the death of Polonius. The King points out the danger Hamlet presents in his madness to all those around him and speaks to Gertrude about how important it is to get him out of the country and to stop the talk of slander.

In the next scene, Hamlet resorts to his purposefully double-edged talk, feigning madness to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but there is clearly method in the madness. He orders them to bring him to the king.

In Scene III, Hamlet verbally duels with the King over the whereabouts of Polonius' body and in doing so, insults Claudius by comparing him to a beggar, and pointing out his mortality. The King patronizingly informs Hamlet that he is sending him to England for his own safety. We are made aware that Claudius is sending Hamlet to his death and that Hamlet is apparently aware of the plot. In these last scenes, Hamlet's speeches are less melancholy, less pensive, pregnant with barely suppressed action. His repartees are quick and savage. The scenes themselves are brief and to the point. Action and tension are building.

Scene IV gives us another glimpse of Fortinbras, as the masculine element illuminates the play once more, but not in glory, but set to fight a futile battle in Poland. Hamlet recognizes this form of masculine corruption:

Hamlet: Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
    Will not debate the question of this straw:
    This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
    That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
    Why the man dies.

But something has changed in Hamlet. His next soliloquy is different from the others - less melancholy, more confident,
his self-criticism apparently designed more to stir him to action than to foment more guilt:

Hamlet: How all occasions do inform against me,
   And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
   If his chief good and market of his time
   Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
   Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
   Looking before and after, gave us not
   That capability and god-like reason
   To rust in us unus'd. Now, whe'r it be
   Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
   Of thinking too precisely on the event,
   A thought, which, quarter'd, hath but one part
   wisdom,
   And ever three parts coward, I do not know
   Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do';
   Sith I have cause and will and strength and
   means
   To do't.

Never before has Hamlet made such a declarative statement as "I have cause and will and strength and means to do it". His ruminations are ceasing, but he is, at the same time, developing a callousness, a warlike stupidity characteristic of the unambivalent masculine:

Hamlet: Rightly to be great
   Is not to stir without great argument,
   But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
   When honour's at stake.

and then goes on to compare himself unfavorably to the twenty thousand men who are about to go to their death for a plot of land not large enough to bury them in. The futile death of twenty thousand men for a plot of meaningless land would not have made sense to the earlier Hamlet. But now, his character is changing:

Hamlet: O! from this time forth,
   My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

In Scene V we see the first glimpse of Ophelia in all her madness, grieving for the death of her father, totally unnerved. Unlike Gertrude, Ophelia has not the strength to rise to the occasion. She is, after all, Polonius' daughter, not King Hamlet's progeny, and she appears now as representative of all that is most morbid in woman - madness, chaos, bawdiness, weakness, passivity, helplessness.

Laertes enters and confronts the King with his father's death and threatens convincingly what Hamlet has been toying with for so long:
Laertes: How come he dead? I'll not be juggled with.
To hell, allegiance! vows to the blackest devil
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.

And then he sees Ophelia, who comes gliding in appearing mad
as a hatter, but then again, there is method in madness.
Ophelia distributes her flowers tellingly, and we know that
Ophelia is aware of more than she has had the courage to
confront, and that her madness is again a symptom of
repressed anger and ambivalent feelings about her father, the
King, Gertrude, and Hamlet, who so used her. Certainly, there
was no evidence that his love was anything but selfish and
manipulative and Ophelia cannot bear this recognition and
seeks in her madness to idealize him. Meanwhile, Laertes is
no Hamlet and in him Claudius has found the ideal murderous
partner.

In a very brief Scene VI we learn that Hamlet has been taken
at sea by some pirates who have conveniently sought to do him
a good turn by returning him to Denmark, while the ship for
England continued on with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

In Scene VII, the King and Laertes plot Hamlet's death, each
to use poison, the traditional feminine method of death. The
King has gone over entirely to evil designs, mirroring
Gertrude's reform, and he carefully manipulates Laertes
desire for revenge. We see that it is not honor which is
motivating Laertes because his plan for Hamlet's murder is
anything but honorable. At the end of the scene the Queen
comes in with news of Ophelia's questionable death, and
although the Queen portrays an accident, we know that she
could not actually have witnessed it, and we have cause now
and at the funeral to suppose suicide as the cause a death
consistent with Ophelia's character.

Act V, Scene I opens in a churchyard with two gravediggers
adding the first comic relief in the play. As Hamlet has
erlier suggested, "bad begins and worse remains behind", and
we get the sense throughout this scene, that although death
is inevitable, it is acceptable because the corruption is
being eradicated. Hamlet is making peace with death, using
his philosophical bent to explore the meaning of life and
death, putting it all in perspective. But there is no sign of
his former, self-chastising melancholy.

Hamlet then sees the funeral procession for Ophelia, hears
his mother wish that Ophelia and Hamlet had been married,
sees Laertes ostentatious grief for Ophelia. Hamlet at first
seems saddened by Ophelia's death, but then joins with
Laertes in a struggle that seems more connected to their

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mutual, competitive crowing than it does to any real concern for Ophelia. She is cared more for in death than in life. But the confrontation does serve to heat up Laertes’ ire even more and the King urges him on.

In the next scene Hamlet tells Horatio of his adventures at sea and reveals his discovery of his own death warrant to be delivered to the King of England by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells Horatio of how he forged a new warrant which would seal the death of the other the two and we notice again that his attitude is changed:

Hamlet: Why man, they did make love to this employment
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
’Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell-incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

Horatio: Why, what a king is this!

Hamlet: Does it not, thinks’t thee, stand me now upon –
He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
Popp’d in between the election and my hopes
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage – is’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? and is’t not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

These are the words of a noble leader, not of an ambivalent, adolescent, feminized boy. This is a changed Hamlet. Priorities are now straight in his mind. He refers to his father as "my king", thus implying his duty to avenge his sovereign, and accuses Claudius of whoring his mother implying that the fault no longer lies with her. He is also able to give credit to his own ambitions and Claudius’ interference with his right to the crown. There are no more rationalizations, no more apologies. He has finally grown to unambivalent, decisive manhood.

A new character arrives, the courtier, Osric, the "water-fly". Hamlet banter with him in the same manner as he once bantered with Polonius, but now it is a comic scene, with Hamlet clearly in control of the situation. Osric brings Hamlet the news of the proposed duel with Laertes, and as the tool of the King, Osric is again an echo of Polonius, devoid of the latter’s power.

We learn that the "queen desires you [Hamlet] to use some
gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play". Apparently Gertrude senses danger and warns Hamlet to make up to Laertes. But Hamlet already senses the danger:

Hamlet: But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter.

Horatio: Nay, good my lord -

Hamlet: It is but foolery; but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman

Horatio: If your mind dislike anything, obey it; I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

Hamlet: Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes. Let be.

Hamlet has no intention of listening to the warnings of his soul. He has prepared himself to meet his fate and now fully intends to do so. The reader can sense a new freedom, almost a joy, in the exercise of his own will, even if death is close at hand.

By the end of the play the negative feminine has been moved off the stage. Gertrude in her corruption and Ophelia in her helplessness have both died. Laertes and Hamlet have avenged their fathers and honor has been restored. The bold and aggressive Fortinbras has claimed the throne and balance is restored, bringing a sense of relief, even though the stage is littered with bodies.

But what has happened to Hamlet? His chronological age can be disputed but his psychological maturation through the course of the play is evident. When the play begins he is a moody, sullen, hostile, melancholic youth. He is unable to exercise his will, unwilling to commit himself to any decision, powerless to act to fulfill the commands of his ghostly father or to get out of the situation entirely. He is closely bound to his mother, but impotently furious at her for her betrayal. He has idealized his father, but sees himself as much less of a man, full of contempt for his own being.

By the end of the play, he has separated himself from his mother, is able to exercise his own will, has become capable of direct and aggressive action, and has dutifully carried out his father's demand for revenge. He has accepted his fate
and in doing so has created a sense of separateness, an
autonomy, a self. His feminine identification has shifted to
assured maleness - he can kill and be killed without remorse,
and in so doing the state is cleansed of corruption, the
disease is eradicated.

But what has been lost in the process? Before the transition
Hamlet is a sensitive, articulate scholar, a man skilled in
relationships, loyal, loving, and playful. He does not
automatically seek the justice of the boy's schoolyard, as
does the contrasting character of Laertes. Hamlet is torn
between conflicting principles of justice, concerned with
values higher than the Biblical "eye for an eye" mandate for
revenge. He is much too aware of the complex and interwoven
nature of close relationships to deceive himself into
believing that murder, even to avenge a wrong, can lead to a
positive outcome.

Hamlet enters the play sensitive and wounded, closely
attached to his mother and the maternal that she represents,
and closely identified with her. But then, the feminine
betrays him. He discovers that his mother is false, that
Ophelia is false, and for Hamlet there is to be no
compromise. He must forcibly repress the woman in himself as
he forcibly suppresses his mother. By the end of the play he
has been successful at this task, but he pays for it with his
sensitivity, his higher reasoning, his life, and perhaps, his
soul. Fate has decreed that he is to have no opportunity to
to resolve the split within himself, to find an androgynous
solution to his problem. So too, we know that the re-
emergence of the masculine principle as represented by
Fortinbras will only bring health for a limited time before
the wheel of life turns again and the masculine becomes
corrupt.

In the end, Laertes does indeed avenge his father as does
Hamlet. In doing so they both die, Gertrude and Ophelia
having gone before them. Fortinbras takes over the throne,
the corruption having been eradicated, and Horatio, the
balanced and uncorrupted man, stays to tell the story as a
warning to those who go hereafter.

And what should the warning be? Perhaps, that within the
state, as within the individual, men must be men and women
must be women, wielding equal but opposite power and control
in order to maintain a healthy balance; that anger must be
controlled but not repressed; that thought must inform action
and action must fortify thought; that there must be a balance
between the concern for others and the development of the
self; that the correction of imbalance and consequent
eradication of corruption may demand great sacrifice.
NOTES


4. Ibid, Pg.44-45

5. As quoted in Gilligan, 1982. Pg.7

6. As quoted in Gilligan, Pg.10

7. Gilligan, Pg. 73

8. Ibid, Pg. 74


11. Ibid. Pg.64

12. Ibid, Pg.61

13. Ibid. Pg.164-165.

14. Ibid. Pg. 174


17. Gilligan, Pg.8.