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| *Hamlet:* Romantic versus Feminist Criticisms on Hamlet’s Treatment of Gertrude and Ophelia |
| Written Task 2 |
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Candidate name: Ming Ni (Minnie) Cui

Candidate number: 2203 – 011

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Written Task Word Count: 1000

**Written Task 2 Outline**

**Prescribed Question Chosen:** How could the text be read and interpreted differently by two different readers?

**Text (s):** *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, Samuel Coleridge’s criticism of *Hamlet*, and *Hamlet and His Problems* by T. S. Eliot or *Hamlet’s Mother* by Carolyn Heilbrun

**Relevant Part of Course:** Part 4 – Detailed study

**Thesis:** During the Romantic literary period, critics, specifically, Samuel Coleridge interpreted Hamlets actions towards Gertrude, and subsequently, Ophelia, as purely indicative of his overly sensitive character, rather, in modern times, with prevalence of feminist criticism of texts, critics say Hamlet’s reaction to Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius, his perception of female sexuality being connected to moral corruption, and his apparent complete mistrust of women, are indicative of misogyny.

**Focus of Task:**

The Romantic literature period focused literary criticism on the individual and internal motive, while modern feminist criticism of *Hamlet* focuses on Hamlet’s actions being based upon the gender system of Early Modern England, such that women were classified as either a maid, a wife, a widow, or a whore.

* Hamlet’s perception Gertrude for her “adultery” in his first soliloquy is an overreaction and holds a misogynistic tone
  + I.ii.129
  + I.ii.150-151
  + I.ii.146
* When speaking harshly to Ophelia (Act III, scene i), Hamlet correlates female sexuality with moral corruption
  + III.i.121-122
  + III.i.144-148
* Hamlet displays a complete mistrust in women when speaking with Ophelia in Act III, scene i, and with Gertrude during *The Mousetrap*, in Act III, scene ii
  + III.i.138-141
  + III.ii.225
  + III.ii.226

Written during the Renaissance humanism movement, *Hamlet* resonates the optimism about the potential scope of human knowledge and understanding. Hamlet famously and infamously delays exacting revenge on Claudius due to inability to balance emotion and reasoning. Nonetheless, one thing he appears almost certain of throughout the course of the play is that Gertrude, his mother, is an adulteress, and that, subsequently, inhibits his interactions with her and Ophelia, the two central female characters. In Early Modern England, when women were either classified as a maid, a wife, a widow, or a whore, Hamlet’s portrayal of his mother would’ve been that of a whore (Beattie 8). Modern literary critics would say such a portrayal illustrates a sense of misogyny, while contrarily, during the Romantic literary period, criticism was focused mainly on Hamlet and his inner motives. During the Romantic literary period, critics, specifically, Samuel Coleridge, interpreted Hamlets actions towards Gertrude, and subsequently, Ophelia, as purely indicative of his overly sensitive character, rather, in today’s context, with prevalence of feminist criticism of texts, Hamlet’s reaction to Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius, his perception of female sexuality being connected to moral corruption, and his apparent complete mistrust of women, are indicative of misogyny.

While Coleridge sees Hamlet’s state in his first soliloquy as “caused by disproportionate mental exertion” (Coleridge 345), modern feminist critics see Hamlet’s first soliloquy as demonstrating his growing cynicism about women in general as result of his mother’s decision to wed Claudius a month after his father’s death. Hamlet contemplates suicide for the first time when he claims, “O that this too too sullied flesh would melt” (Shakespeare I.ii.129). The diction of “sullied” creates disease imagery and alludes to his growing hatred for sharing the same blood as Gertrude, for, “O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourn’d longer” (Shakespeare I.ii.150-151). By saying a beast would have mourned longer than his mother, he exhibits the cynicism he feels towards Gertrude. His mother being a predominant female character in his life, such a line shows his developing mistrust of all womankind. Further from his disproval of Gertrude’s actions, Hamlet cries out famously, “Frailty, thy name is woman” (Shakespeare I.ii.146), to demonstrate his consequent shattered impression of womanhood as a whole. This phrase holds a misogynistic tone, such that Hamlet is regarding all women as weak and prone to seduction. Throughout the play, Gertrude is never hinted as being an adulteress, nor is she revealed explicitly as plotting with Claudius to kill King Hamlet. Thus, Hamlet’s soliloquy appears to be a misogynistic overreaction to his mother marrying another man, instead of mourning longer like an obedient wife.

Further to his treatment of Gertrude, Hamlet also demonstrates a misogynistic attitude when speaking with Ophelia in Act III, scene i, as he speaks about the connection between female sexuality and moral corruption. Coleridge sees Hamlet’s “harshness” as caused by “discovery [from the strange and forced manner of Ophelia] in a mood so anxious” that “[Ophelia] was not acting a part of her own, but was a decoy” (Coleridge 362) for Polonius and Claudius. However, Hamlet’s words in this scene undoubtedly have more connotation than simply being a reaction to the espionage. He tells Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (Shakespeare III.i.121-122). He repeats the word “nunnery” five times in his speech in lines 121-151, and such repetition emphasizes his equivalency of chastity with goodness, and sex with corruption. He warns Ophelia not to have sex so that she can stop the cycle of sex leading to the creation of more sinners. Such an equivalency is misogynistic and alludes to the Original Sin, with Eve being the temptress that ultimately allures all subsequent men to sin, like an infection. Hamlet also denounces all women for being seducers when he says,

I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. (Shakespeare III.i.144-148)

In this passage, “you” is used impersonally for women in general, thus, Hamlet uses the artificiality of “paintings” as an analogy for their surreptitiously seductive nature. The polysyndeton of “and” further emphasizes his passionate anger for the subject, and his equivalency of female sexuality to moral corruption.

Moreover, Hamlet displays a complete mistrust of women in his speech to Ophelia about marriage in Act III, scene i, and in his conversations with Gertrude during *The Mousetrap* in Act III, scene ii. Whereas Coleridge sees not a significance in either of these two passages to the development of Hamlet’s character or his views on women, modern feminist critics would see his words as extremely misogynistic. To Ophelia, he says, “Get thee to a nunnery, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them,” (Shakespeare III.i.138-141). In this line, Hamlet speaks of women, who will sooner or later be unfaithful to their husbands, through the allusion of “monsters” to horned cuckolds. By seeing all women as unfaithful, he completely distrusts them all. Later, at the play, when Gertrude notes, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (Shakespeare III.ii.225), Hamlet responds with, “O, but she’ll keep her word” (Shakespeare III.ii.226). His response is a reference to how women should act – by keeping their promises – and denotes a disproval for how women actually act, as exemplified in Gertrude marrying Claudius. Both instances indicate Hamlet’s mistrust for all women, thereby, manifesting misogyny in his interactions with the play’s central female characters.

While Romantic literary critics, like Romantic Movement founder Samuel Coleridge, focused their interpretation of Hamlet on his character and inner motives as an overly sensitive human being, a modern feminist reading of Hamlet’s character focuses on his misogynistic behaviours towards the play’s two central female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia. Ergo, the context in which *Hamlet* is received is important to how the text is interpreted. Whether his actions are intentional to deceive or inadvertent due to his overly-sensitive character, Hamlet’s behaviour and words exemplify his misogyny in today’s social context.

(Word Count: 1000)

**Works Cited**

[Beattie, Cordelia. *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.](http://www.bibme.org/)

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets*. Comp. T. Ashe. Freeport, NY: for Libraries, 1972. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Roma Gill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print