

The following notes are from the book [Understanding Hamlet: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents](#) by Richard Corum. You can find this book in Net Library.

HAMLET'S MELANCHOLY

Hamlet Sr. was a soldier-king who spent his time in camps of war & battlefields. Gertrude was unhappy in this patriarchal world. Thus, Claudius offers her what she desired: not drinking bouts & recitals of battle legends, but to focus Denmark's social energies on culture, not war, where Gertrude would be a center of power.

Everyone seems happily prospering "in the sun" of Gertrude & Claudius's court, except Hamlet. He is suffering from the loss of his father & his father's world, and angry that his hopes of being king have been crushed by Claudius's reign. Thus, he is standing disgruntled on the sidelines. Moreover, these losses & dislocations are happening to him at the age of 30, when a man is at the height of his powers & abilities.

What is the effect on a 30 year old prince who has long expected & is ready to take over power when he is suddenly confronted with the loss of a masculine paternal world & the legacy of the royal identity that went with it? And what happens when such a prince finds himself sidelined by a new dominant regime in which he has no identity? On Hamlet, the effect is **melancholy**.

Hamlet is told by the king & queen to be a good son (or else). Options: **1)** Hamlet cannot be a dutiful son to Claudius & Gertrude, **2)** wants to return to school, but the king & queen will not allow this, **3)** involving himself with Ophelia, but this relationship flounders, & **4)** male-bonding with Rosen. & Guild., yet this is not possible once Hamlet finds out that they were sent for by the king to spy on Hamlet.

Instead of the dominant man Hamlet had been in the sun of his father's masculine court, or the sun he expected to be following his father's death, Hamlet finds himself merely "in the sun" of a stepfather who (in his mind) destroyed his world by stealing its phallic resources. Thus, cast down from his previous mountain into an archaic female position, unable to do anything but "batten" [grow fat] on his own personal moor, and unaccustomed to the melancholy/melancholia created by such a sudden and wholly undesired access to his formerly repressed feelings of powerlessness, rage, and marginality, Hamlet, no longer the man he once was, admits "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise" (2.2.287–88). "Denmark'sa prison" (2.2.239). The cosmos, bereft of its customary substance, is nothing but garbage: a "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable... sterile promontory" [i.e., a nonphallic, penilized lump] (1.2.133–34; 2.2.290). The heavens, once the location and source of life itself, have become "a foul and pestilent congregation [mass] of vapors" (2.2.293). Life is nothing but "outrageous fortune," "a sea of troubles," "Th'oppressor's wrong," "fardels" [burdens] to bear, "ills" (3.1.58 ff). And women, once chaste wives inside (or whores outside) the pales and forts of masculine space, are now seen to be indiscriminate mixtures, hiding their fickle, pernicious natures under misleading "paint" and treacherous disguises. The point is not that Hamlet, depressed, loses interest in the world around him; rather, the point is that this world, now rotten, is

no longer the source of the powers and possibilities it once possessed. And in the wake of such a catastrophic loss, Hamlet has become a melancholic thing “of nothing.”

PHYSIOLOGY

As it had in the classical past, this elemental physics provided early moderns with a foundation for a humoral physiology. Just as four physical elements constituted everything in the universe (or macrocosm), so four physiological humors constituted the human body (or microcosm):

1. *blood*, hot and moist like air;
2. *phlegm*, cold and moist like water;
3. *yellow bile* (or yellow choler), hot and dry like fire; and
4. *black bile* (or black choler), cold and dry like earth.

La Primaudaye (1594) puts it well:

We understand by a Humor, a liquid and running body into which the food is converted in the liver, to this end that bodies might be nourished and preserved by them. And as there are four elements ...so there are four sorts of humors answerable to their natures, being all mingled together with the blood.... Now, concerning the first of them, we are to know that the proper nature of blood is to be hot and moist: wherein it answers to the nature of air. It is temperate, sweet, and fatty, as also the best and chief part of nourishment.... Next, that thin skim which is seen on the top of it [i.e., on the top of the blood], resembling the flower of wine, is that humor that is called yellow choler, or the choleric humor which is hot and dry, of a bitter taste, and answering to the nature of fire. ...Moreover, those small streams of water, which we see mingled in the blood, proceed of the phlegmatic humor that is cold and moist, like to water of whose nature it holds.... Lastly, the black humor and most earthy, which looks like the very bottom of a deep, red, and thick wine, or like the lees in a vessel full of wine or oil, is the melancholic humor, or as some term it, black choler, being cold and dry like to the earth, with which it hath some agreement. (II:lxiv, 523–24)

PSYCHOLOGY

Physiology in turn supplied the basis for early modern psychology in the sense that the properties and proportions of a person’s physiological humors determined his/her psychological temperament, complexion, or temperature (a person’s character or personality). In humoral terms, it is possible to think of one’s body as a quartet of musical instruments performing in three strikingly different fashions.

1. If your four humors are in balance, you are a happy, productive, vital, spontaneous person, though, for most early modern theorists, such “an excellent and golden temperature...must only be understood and seen with the internal eyes of reason, seeing it has not [had] a real existence” since the fall of man (Walkington 1607, 151).

2. To the degree that one of your four humors plays somewhat louder or at a different tempo than the other three, you have what the age called a natural complexion or “temperature”: that is, you were *sanguine* (optimistic to silly), *choleric* (angry to violent), *phlegmatic* (dull to slothful), or *melancholic* (gloominess to depressed) to the degree that your blood, yellow choler, phlegm, or black bile predominated (*melancholy* is borrowed from Greek, *melan*, black, *choli*, bile).

La Primaudaye provides a useful introduction to this psychology:

Hereof it is, that when there is excess of the phlegmatic humour in men, their natures are commonly slothful, they shun labor, and give themselves to bodily pleasures, they love dainties, and delicate meats and drinks, they are tender and effeminate, and clean contrary to stout and valiant men. And if there be excess of the choleric humor, their natures are easily provoked and stirred up to wrath: but their anger is as fire of thorns, that being kindled and making a great noise, is by and by quenched again. Their gestures also are more quick and vehement, and their hastiness is commonly foolish and turbulent: they babble much, and are like to vessels full of holes, unable to hold in and keep any secret matter: they are fierce in assailing, but inconstant in sustaining the assault, in some sort resembling the nature of dogs, which bark and bite if they can, and afterward fly away. And if there be excess of the melancholic humor, the natures of such are sad, still, hard to please, suspicious, conceited, obstinate, some more and some less. (II:lxviii, 535)

Note the implicit gendering of phlegm and black bile as female, which is another way of saying that for a man to be melancholic or phlegmatic is to be in the female position.

3. To the degree, however, that one or more of your humors are “adust” (have been burnt) due to excessive heat, you would suffer one of the unnatural forms of these humors, or what modern medical discourse would term mental illnesses. La Primaudaye adds to the passage cited above, “if the choleric and melancholic humors be corrupt and mingled together,...their natures become monstrous, proud, full of envy, fraud, subtleties, venomous and poisonfull, hateful and diabolical,” a condition commented on at greater length in a passage by Timothy Bright from *A Treatise of Melancholy*:

Besides the former kinds, there are sorts of unnatural melancholia ...of another nature far disagreeing from the other.... They rise of [from] the natural humors...by excessive distemper of heat, burned as it were into ashes in comparison of humor, by which the humor of like nature being mixed, turns in into a sharp lye.... This sort raises the greatest tempest of perturbations and most of all destroys the brain with all his faculties, and disposition of action, and makes both it, and the heart cheer more uncomfortably: and if it rise of the natural melancholy, beyond all likelihood of truth, [it will] frame monstrous terrors of fear and heaviness without cause. (1586, 110–11)

BLACK BILE, MELANCHOLY, MELANCHOLIA: CAUSE, SYMPTOMS, EFFECTS

As we have seen, when black bile predominates over the other humors in the body, natural melancholy results. However, should one’s sludge-like black bile become corrupted by excessive heat, turn into noxious fumes, rise into the brain, and infect one’s mental faculties (imagination, reason, memory), then *melancholia* results, a disease that is chronic and degenerative.

In *The Whole Treatise* (1606), William Perkins illustrates the difference:

Touching that which comes by Melancholy, sundry things are to be considered.... 1. First of all, if it be asked what Melancholy is? I answer, it is a kind of earthy and black blood, specially in the spleen, corrupted and distempered.... 2. The second is, what are the effects and operations of Melancholia? Ans.... There is no humor, yea nothing in man’s body, that has so strange effects as this humor has being once distempered.... Now the effects thereof...are of two sorts. The first is in the brain and head. For this humor being

corrupted, it sends up noisome fumes as clouds or mists which do corrupt the imagination, and makes the instrument of reason unfit for understanding and sense. Hence follows the first effect, strange imaginations, conceits and opinions framed in the mind.... [And] because it corrupts the instrument [i.e., the mind], and the instrument being corrupted, the faculty cannot bring forth good actions. (I:2, 193)

Causes of Melancholia

Melancholia was caused in part by traumatic loss: “Sorrow.”

Among the kinds of loss early modern theorists catalogued were *object* losses (loss of a father, lover, friend, etc.), *attribute* losses (loss of one’s social position, wealth, youth, physical strength, appearance or capabilities, or the proper functioning of one’s mental faculties), and what may be called *subjunctive* losses (the failure of an expectation or wish with respect to a desired social position, erotic object, or ability). Of these sorts of losses, two particularly exercised early modern commentators: (1) loss of a specific erotic object, and (2) loss of a specific position within a social system, which is why these terms are the ones those onstage turn to to account for Hamlet’s melancholy—Polonius confident that it is the result of Hamlet’s thwarted love for Ophelia, Gertrude certain that it is “no other but the main / His fathers death, and our o’erhasty marriage” (2.2.56–57), and Hamlet and Claudius just as certain that it is Hamlet’s frustrated ambition.

Effects of Loss I: Love Melancholia

An early modern audience would *not* have thought Polonius mad to think Hamlet love mad, particularly since *love melancholia* had been commonplace in English culture.

Effects of Loss II: Malcontentedness

At the end of the sixteenth century, a large number of young gentlemen no longer able to secure or maintain noble, not to mention heroic places in masculine structures of power, finding themselves superfluous, and hearing their sense of thwarted ambition, disappointment, alienation, and neglected superiority anticipated onstage by Hamlet’s “I eat the air promise-crammed,” “I lack advancement,” and “while the grass grows, the proverb is something musty” (3.2.85–86, 314–15), became melancholic *malcontents*. Their excessive discontents, cares, crosses, miseries bubbled up, like Hamlet’s, as satirical railing against, if not as active efforts to destroy the power structures that denied them entrance and centrality, as well as against the women whom they regarded as the cause of their failures. In fact, these malcontent types came to be as common on the streets of London (due in large part to the popularity of *Hamlet*) as in the drama of the first decades of the seventeenth century, with the result that the markers of malcontentedness quickly became conventional: “surly preoccupation...and unsociability...; negligent disorder in dress; sense of superiority; tendency to rail enviously at an unappreciative world; inclination toward treachery and sedition,” not to mention the characteristic attire and attitude of those, like Hamlet in his “inky cloak,”

who wore nothing but black, and stood “with folded arms, hat pulled low, and eyes morosely fixed” (Babb 1951, 83, 119).

Effects of Loss III: Other Symptoms of Melancholia

1. Hamlet’s disinclination to be “in the sun” occurs in many treatises. In André du Laurens, *A Discovrse of the Preservation of the Sight* (1599), for example: “Melancholic men are...enemies to the Sun, and shun the light, because their spirits and humors are altogether contrary to the light” (96).

2. Hamlet’s sense that melancholy endows him with superior abilities originates from a text, *Problemata XXX*, attributed to Aristotle, that posits black bile as the source of genius: “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by diseases caused by black bile?... But many are affected by the diseases of madness or frenzy, which accounts for the Sibyls, soothsayers, and all inspired persons, when their condition is due not to disease but to a natural mixture” (953a10–14, translated by W. S. Hett).

3. Elements of Hamlet’s antic disposition are also recognizable symptoms of black bile disorders. According to Timothy Bright, the melancholic often gives himself over to “unbridled laughter, rising not from any comfort of the heart, or gladness of spirit, but from a disposition in such sort altered, as by error of conceit, that gesture is in a counterfeit manner bestowed upon that disagreeing passion, whose nature is rather to extinguish itself with tears, then assuaged by the sweet breath of cheerfulness” [i.e., the melancholic laughs in uncontrolled fashion in order to mask the disagreeable passions and tears of his condition under an illusion of happiness] (1586, Chapter 18, 111; see also Bright’s remarks on Sardonian laughter below).

4. Bright and others also regard procrastination an attribute of melancholy: “[the melancholic is] *doubtful before, and long in deliberation*: suspicious, painful in study, and circumspect, given to fearful and terrible dreams...because these domestic fears, or that internal obscurity, causes an opinion of danger in outward affairs where there is no cause of doubt” (Bright 1586, 124, 131).

5. Unstable plots and intrigues of the sort Hamlet pursues are, Thomas Walkington’s *The Optick Glasse of Hvmors* (1607) tells us, likewise characteristic of melancholics: “oftentimes the melancholic man by his contemplative faculty, by his assiduity of sad and serious meditation is a brocher [instigator] of dangerous Machiavellisme, an inventor of stratagems, quirks, and policies, which are never put in practice” (129).

6. More important, virtually every theorist saw hallucinations and delusions as the most spectacular and disturbing effects of melancholic diseases. Two passages cited below document the fact that melancholics were commonly seen as fabricating ghosts and apparitions that they regarded as real.

7. And, finally, Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide was proverbial for the melancholic: “This black melancholy humor...will make the spirit & mind darkish, whereby it grows to be blockish, & the heart loses all his cheerfulness...which causes a man to hate & to be weary of all things, even of the light & of a man’s self so that he shall take pleasure in nothing but in his melancholy... refusing all joy & consolation. To conclude, some grow

so far as to hate themselves, & so fall to despair, yea many kill & destroy themselves''
(La Primaudaye 1586, 467).

REVENGE

Historical Stages of Revenge

Revenge as an absolute necessity, since unless groups took justice into their own hands, justice would not exist.

England 1056, national church/state emerged outlawing revenge and renaming it *blood revenge*. This was a form of homicide, as the responsibility for enforcing justice passed from the family to the church/state. When the church/state could not enforce justice, it became the responsibility of God.

Hamlet's Options

1. **patience:** female quality; relies on a diety's or state's justice.
2. **suicide:** turns the aggression tied up in melancholia against the self.
3. **revenge:** turns the aggression against someone else.

The Code of Patience

FROM STEPHEN HAWES, PASTIME OF PLEASURE (1509)

Who is oppressed with a little wrong,
Revenging it he may it soon increase;
For better it is to suffer among
An injury, as for to keep the peace,
Than to begin which he shall never cease.

Wars once begun, it is hard to know
Who shall abide and who shall overthrow.

THE GHOST

How does the ghost solve Hamlet's problems?

1. consolation—the return of a deceased loved one to console those left behind.
2. nostalgia—by reconstituting the most powerful part of a past world that is now fading, his father, Hamlet can once again be the son to a heroic warlord rather than an effeminized Claudius.
3. emotional vindication—a ghost speaking of murder, adultery, & betrayal legitimizes Hamlet's desire to turn his dark rage against the bright new world his mother & stepfather are installing.
4. heroic identity/role—Hamlet's ghost transforms what everyone else in Denmark regards as an accidental death into a murder, and Hamlet can fashion himself (however privately) as the solution to a central but unknown problem. If there were

no ghost & no murder, then there would be no need for a hero (or detective) and Hamlet would have to hand the term hero to his mother & stepfather in recognition of their accomplishments in remodeling Denmark.

Types of Ghosts

1. angels from heaven
2. ghosts of the dead temporarily returned from purgatory
3. demons from hell disguised as ghosts of dead persons
4. ghost-hallucinations in the minds of the mad
5. ghost-frauds perpetrated by criminals

Demonic Ghosts

Catholics in Shakespeare's audience would have little difficulty in thinking Hamlet's ghost a demon, and would have concluded that Hamlet is not following correct procedure for coping with such a creature.

FROM NOEL TAILLEPIED, A TREATISE OF GHOSTS, BEING THE PSICHOLOGIE, OR TREATISE UPON APPARITIONS AND SPIRITS, OF DISEMBODIED SOULS, PHANTOM FIGURES, STRANGE PRODIGES, AND OF OTHER MIRACLES AND MARVELS (1588)

A ghost will appear to the person whom he has most loved while on earth, since this person will be readiest to fulfill any wish communicated by the departed. But if it be an evil Spirit, he has a thousand subtle fetches and foul tricks, and will again and again deceive.... This evil Spirit goes about seeking whom he may devour, and should he chance to find a man already of a melancholic humor, who on account of some great loss, or haply because he deems his honor tarnished, the demon here has a fine field to his hand, and he will tempt the poor wretch to depths of misery and depression.... These Spirits appear in many forms and shapes. ... Sometimes they even appear under the likeness of some individual who can at once be recognized, a man either still living, or long since dead.... If we see some figure or appearance, we must not at once conclude that this is a disembodied Spirit manifesting itself to us, . . . Neither let us be alarmed by sudden shrieks and loud yells, for if evil Spirits appear they cannot do us any further harm than God permits. If they are good Spirits they will entreat us well. If it is a mere phantasm without volition or intelligence, a mere shadow, how foolish to be afraid of it! It is quite true that we are naturally affrighted and our hair will rise and prickle on our heads, nevertheless even if it be a spirit of evil and malignant aspect do not fear . . . While it is necessary not to give way to any panicky fear, a man seeing a ghost should not be over-confident in himself and presumptuously daring. On such occasions no sword of tempered steel however trusty will avail, we must fight with spiritual weapons.

Fraudulent Ghosts

La Primaudaye, an orthodox Catholic who believed in angels and purgatorial ghost-souls, makes an argument for assigning "natural causes" to ghost sightings conjured up by the deranged, or fraudulently constructed out of thin air by cranks and malicious sorts.

FROM PIERRE LA PRIMAUDAYE, THE FRENCH ACADEMIE (1594)

Many are thought to be possessed with Devils, when indeed they are not. For there are some counterfeit cranks and some also who are melancholy mad, and carried away by

some disease of the brain: but because their melancholy and fury is violent and strange, ignorant people suppose they are possessed with some spirit. We may not doubt that evil spirits desirous to hurt men both in their goods, bodies, and souls, use all the means and occasions they can possibly invent to execute their malice when it pleases God to give them leave.

As Ludwig Lavater wrote in *De Spectris*: “God does not send us souls hither to inform us. The common and ordinary way whereby it pleases God to deal with us, is his word” (1570).

Ghosts & French Law

FROM PIERRE LE LOYER, IIII LIVRES DES SPECTRES OU APPARITIONS

(Paris, 1586)

Lawsuit involving a haunted house. Litigants A rented the house—a residence in the suburbs of Tours—and B was the owner. A short time after A moved in, the racket of ghosts was heard...which so disturbed the A family that they vacated and sued B for damages. It was argued that the presence of spirits, presumably known to owner B, made any such lease invalid from the start; the place should never have been offered to A. A decision was rendered in favour of A, the ex-tenant. The owner appealed and his attorney argued that the court was wrong to break a contract established by the statutes and customs of France just for some stupid claim about spirits. In fact the judges had made an evil example of themselves by encouraging in others a superstitious and foolish belief in ghosts. Even if “everyone says” that the dead return, does it follow that a judge too must go along with common opinion and rumours, rather than the accepted laws of the land?

In March 1576, the higher court reversed the earlier decision, directing that the contract was valid and the tenant bound by it, clattering ghosts or not.

THE QUEEN

Gertrude is the most unjustly treated character in *Hamlet*. An angry ghost slanders her. Hamlet “will speak daggers to her, but use none”. In the ghost and closet scenes, Gertrude, put on trial, is told she is what is rotten in Denmark. And at the end she is abandoned and killed. Gertrude is allegedly guilty of the following:

1. committing adultery
2. being complicit in the murder of her husband and living with the assassin of her deceased husband
3. failing to observe proper mourning
4. remarrying excessively fast
5. committing incest
6. being compulsively sexual
7. exercising gross lack of judgment
8. neglecting her duty to her son
9. being fickle and false

Possible Causes of Hamlet's Rage against Gertrude:

- 1) Thwarted Ambition:** Gertrude has destroyed his hopes of becoming king. Thus, he blames and takes his disappointment out on her, instead of taking it out on himself, his father, or the patriarchal system that hasn't worked for him.
- 2) Projection:** Hamlet fails to feel the grief for his father he believes he should. Possibly, plagued by guilt and fear, Hamlet is projecting his own inability to react sufficiently onto his mother in order to protect his image of himself as an ideal son.
- 3) Resentment:** Hamlet wants to get on with his life as his mother has, yet he is denied continued schooling or a relationship with Ophelia. Instead of accepting desires and feelings that are normal for a person in his situation, Hamlet apparently feels such guilt for not living up to an expectation that he deeply mourn that he displaces his failure to do so onto his mother.

FUNERALS AND MOURNING

Early modern texts on Elizabethan culture indicate that by mourning Hamlet Sr. for a month, Gertrude observed proper Elizabethan protocol. Moreover, virtually *no* member of an early modern theatre audience would have expected Gertrude to mourn longer than she did. In the middle ages, "widowed [Catholic] queens were expected to stay for a year or more in darkened rooms hung with black". But, are these queens engaged in this practice because they are in deep mourning? Or are they engaged in it because they have been locked away in dark rooms by a new regime as a way of keeping them out of the way as it takes over and establishes its power, something it would presumably find more difficult to do if a previous queen were actively present at court? In this context Hamlet's desire to see Gertrude mourn longer than a "little month" can be read as a desire to see her place herself in a confinement that would preclude her from retaining any power, and thus allow him to take over.

INCEST

By marrying Claudius, Gertrude violates biblical prohibition, and Tudor church law, which states: "A woman may not marry with her... husband's brother." And, as critics frequently tell us, Elizabethans thought that "the marriage of brothers- and sisters-in-law had been branded shameful over hundreds of years of moral teaching since Old Testament times". Indeed, many in Biblical and classical legends who broke this prohibition were seen as coming to a bad end, as did Tarquinius, Superbus, and Fengon, both killers of brothers and husbands of widowed sisters-in-law. In light of these precedents, a number of critics have concluded that Shakespeare expected his audience to view the Claudius–Gertrude marriage with "as much abhorrence as the Athenians felt for the union of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta in Sophocles".

So, while the Shakespearean audience would not have blamed Gertrude for remarrying so quickly, they would have criticized her for marrying her brother-in-law.

WIDOWHOOD

For Gertrude, it is also, of course, about sex. Had she predeceased Hamlet Sr., Hamlet would have expected his father to go on having a sex life. But when his father predeceases Gertrude, he is appalled that she desires to continue being sexually active as he makes clear in the closet scene:

“You cannot call it love, for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame,
it’s humble, / And waits upon the judgment”

1) On the male side, some patriarchal authorities wanted women remarried as quickly as possible to keep them under male authority. **2)** Others supported second marriages, particularly for young widows, on the grounds that it was better for such women to have sex within a marriage than to do so outside matrimony and burn. **3)** And other patriarchs opposed widows remarrying to keep lines of inheritance from getting tangled by second families. **4) On the female side**, some widows did not want to marry again, having been burnt once, and seem to have been happy retiring from the social world. **5)** Others had to remarry to keep a former husband’s business going, or to have sex without guilt. **6)** and many, like Gertrude, were seeking to find in a second marriage what they hadn’t found in their often arranged first marriage.

Patriarchal Society/4 Levels of the Universe:

1. god and angels
2. men
3. good women (good mothers in Catholic, and good wives in Protestant patriarchies)
4. bad women (shrews, whores, etc.)

In this rating system, a woman’s *value* is determined solely by men. So, to know what Gertrude is worth is to ask whether the patriarchal men in her life judge her to be an item on the third or fourth shelf of their universe. As Hamlet puts it, she is a destructive and evil woman.

ELIZABETHAN DISCOURSE ON MATRIMONY

Of the countless number of pages written in early modern England that are devoted to the apparently delicious patriarchal task of detailing the “natural” and “inevitable” limitations of woman, the following excerpt from the Elizabethan government’s widely distributed and much quoted *Homily on Matrimony* will stand as a moderate dominant instance. It is also a particularly good context in which to set Hamlet’s injunction to himself before entering his mother’s closet—“be cruel, not unnatural, /...speak daggers to her, but use none” (3.2.365–66)—as well as his behavior once he’s in.

FROM AN HOMILY ON THE STATE OF MATRIMONY

(London: R. Jugge, 1563)

For the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind: therefore they be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weak affections

and dispositions of mind, more than men be; and lighter they be and more vain in their fantasies and opinions. These things must be considered of the man, that he be not too stiff; so that he ought to wink at some things, and must gently expound all things, and to forbear.

Howbeit, the common sort of men do judge that such moderation should not become a man: for they say that it is a token of a womanish cowardliness; and therefore they think that it is a man's part to fume in anger, to fight with fist and staff. Howbeit, howsoever they imagine, undoubtedly St Peter does better judge what should be seeming to a man, and what he should most reasonable perform. For he said reasoning should be used, and not fighting. Yea, he said more, that the woman ought to have a certain *honor* attributed to her; that is to say, she must be spared and borne with, the rather for that she is *the weaker vessel*, of a frail heart, inconstant, and with a word soon stirred to wrath.

ONE REACTIONARY PATRIARCH

Depending on one's point of view, the most (in)famous (mis)representation of women in the period was *The First Blast*. From John Knox's perspective, the patriarchal world he was accustomed to living in was changing radically, and his reaction was to vent outraged invective against the two monstrous women he regarded as causing and benefiting from such a change: Mary Tudor of England (1516–1558) and Mary, Queen of Scots (1542–1587). As a representative of man, Knox will not tolerate any loss of dominance over women, any loss of superiority to women, or any loss of man's exclusive enjoyment of privileges and rights long denied to women. In short, Knox will not stop being a man as this character is scripted by patriarchal culture, nor will he stop acting this man's part, speaking its lines, wearing its costumes, and the like, since, in his mind, man is in power or he is a cowardly slave; indeed, writing this angry and abusive tract is one of the ways in which Knox intends to stay on top. Though written to blast the allegedly monstrous rule of the two Marys, it was published just prior to Elizabeth's ascension to the throne in 1558, thereby inadvertently creating a third royal target for Knox's invective. Like Hamlet's, Knox's inspiration stems from a *locus classicus* of misogynist thinking, *Ecclesiasticus* 25:26, 28: "Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die.... If she walk not in thine obedience.... Cut her off then from thy flesh and forsake her." Clearly a text more to Hamlet's liking than the *Homily* excerpted above.

FROM JOHN KNOX, THE FIRST BLAST OF THE TRUMPET AGAINST THE MONSTROUS REGIMENT OF WOMEN

(Geneva, 1558)

To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and, finally it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.... And first, where that I affirm the empire of a woman to be a thing repugnant to nature, I mean not only that God by the order of his creation has spoiled woman of authority and dominion, but also that man has seen, proved and pronounced just causes why that it so should be. Man, I say, in many other cases blind,

does in this behalf see very clearly. For the causes be so manifest, that they can not be hid. For who can deny but it is repugnant to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick and impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole and strong, and, finally, that the foolish, mad, and frenetic shall govern the discrete, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women, compared unto man in bearing of authority. For their sight in civil regiment is but blindness: their strength, weakness: their counsel, foolishness: and judgment frenzy, if it be rightly considered.

Nature I say, does paint them forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish: and experience has declared them to be inconstant, variable, cruel, and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment. And these notable faults have men in all ages espied in that kind, for the which not only have they removed women from rule and authority, but also some have thought that men subject to the counsel or empire of their wives were unworthy of all public office.... What would [Aristotle] (I pray you) have said to that realm or nation where a woman sits crowned in parliament among the midst of men. Oh fearful and terrible are thy judgments (o Lord) which thus have abased man for his iniquity! I am assuredly persuaded that if any of those men [in the classical past], which illuminated only by the light of nature, did see and pronounce causes sufficient, why women ought not to bear rule nor authority, should this day live and see a woman sitting in judgment or riding from parliament in the midst of men, having the royal crown upon her head, the sword and scepter borne before her, in sign that the administration of justice was in her power; I am assuredly persuaded, I say, that such a sight should so astonish them that, they should judge the whole world to be transformed into Amazons, and that such a metamorphosis and change was made of all the men of that country...or at least, that albeit the outward form of men remained, yet should they judge that their hearts were changed from the wisdom, understanding, and courage of men, to the foolish fondness and cowardice of women. Yea they further should pronounce, that where women reign or be in authority, that there must needs vanity be preferred to virtue, ambition and pride to temperance and modesty, and, finally, that avarice, the mother of all mischief, must needs devour equity and justice.... To the further declaration of the imperfections of women, of their natural weakness, and inordinate appetites, I might adduce histories proving some women to have died for sudden joy, some for impatience to have murdered themselves, some to have burned with such inordinate lust, that for the quenching of the same, they have betrayed to strangers their country and city: and some to have been so desirous of dominion, that for the obtaining of the same, they have murdered the children of their own sons. Yea, and some have killed with cruelty their own husbands and children.

FEMINIST DEFENSE AND COUNTERATTACK

A number of early modern feminist texts existed that provide alternative discourses with which to understand Gertrude. Moreover, many in Shakespeare's audience, knowing these discourses, would have used them to reject Hamlet's and his ghost's accusations. What these audience members would have seen in Hamlet was not a bright young culture hero accurately mapping the terrain in which he lived, but a tragic figure caught up in a reactionary backlash that offered women nothing except dutiful silent submission or pain

and death. What they would have seen in Gertrude was a courageous woman terminated by this reactionary patriarchal culture because she sought to imagine and sustain a life and maximize a mode of happiness prohibited by patriarchal law. Refusing to be a good woman any longer, and rejecting as well the name of whore, Gertrude briefly writes a comedy that proves impossible to stage in a rotting patriarchal Denmark because enraged son, false lover, and embittered ghost conspire to purge her and purify Denmark.

EARLY EMERGENT FEMINISM

The name Jane Anger, possibly a pseudonym, dramatically symbolizes the emotion fueling the argument of the text printed below. And though nothing is known about her life, Anger is the first published emergent English woman author to defend her sex. In England prior to Anger, defenses of women had been written by men or were put in the mouths of female characters in male-authored texts. Margery Kempe's defense of herself as a self-empowered Christian woman was written, for example, by a male cleric, Margery being illiterate. The most outspoken defender of female liberty prior to Anger probably was Chaucer's Wife of Bath, a character in *The Canterbury Tales*. On the continent, published debate was likewise almost exclusively a male-male controversy, and centered, except for texts like Agrippa's *Treatise* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, on proving or disproving women's capacity to live up to ideal religious role models—that is, whether women could indeed be good women rather than dissimulators or whores. Like Gertrude, Anger clearly isn't interested in playing either of these patriarchal roles, recognizing that they cast women into cleft halves because patriarchal men need good women *and* bad ones to satisfy the antithetical ends of their desires. For this reason Anger is one of the first self-acknowledged feminists in the culture, though in her own time she clearly was not alone. Mannish women, or "*hic mulier*, or, the man-woman" as they were described by their enemies, were becoming an increasingly acknowledged feature of London society, as were the "roaring girls" modeled after Mol Cutpurse (1584–1659), who, like Mol, saw themselves celebrated onstage by, among other popular plays, Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (1611). In other words, *Jane Anger her Protection for Women* is part of an increasingly powerful early modern feminist activist movement.

The occasion for *her Protection* is the anonymous work Anger attacks throughout her text, *Book: his Surfeit in Love*, which, though no longer extant (if in fact it ever existed), seems to be a debauched lover's fatuous rant about how little he is getting in return for all he puts into sex and poetry ("surfeit" he means something like "a morbid condition of disgust caused by excessive indulgence in sexual debauchery and the poetry and flattery that led up to it"). It is against *Surfeit's* various modes of sexual exploitation and the aggression hiding behind it that Anger desires to protect women. In short, Anger was made mad enough by the gender rubbish she found in *Surfeit in Love* to denounce patriarchal constructions of sexuality. With this text, Jane Anger publicly proclaims herself the subject of verbs and predicates in sentences like: "I teach," "I have a right to be angry with stupid men," "I am not available for male abuse, sexual or otherwise"—a list, longer in later feminist texts, that is already very long in Anger's.

FROM JANE ANGER HER PROTECTION FOR WOMEN

(London: Richard Iones, 1589)

A Protection for Women. &c.

The desire that every man has to show his true vein in writing is unspeakable, and their minds are so carried away with the manner, as no care at all is had of the matter: they run so into rhetoric, as often times they overrun the bounds of their own wits, and go they not whether. If they have stretched their invention so hard on a last, as it is at a stand, there remains but one help, which is, to write of us women.... And therefore that the god may see how thankfully they receive his liberality, they fall straight to dispraising and slandering our silly [innocent] sex. But judge what the cause should be of this their so great malice towards simple women. Doubtless the weakness of our wits, and our honest bashfulness, by reason whereof they suppose that there is not one amongst us who can, or dare reprove their slanders and false reproaches: their slanderous tongues are so short, and the time wherein they have lavished out their words freely, has been so long, that they know we cannot catch hold of them to pull them out, and they think we will not write to reprove their lying lips.

We are contrary to men, because they are contrary to that which is good: because they are spur blind, they cannot see into our natures, and we too well (though we had but half an eye) into their conditions, because they are so bad.... They are comforted by our means: they nourished by the meats we dress: their bodies freed from diseases by our cleanliness.... Without our care they lie in their beds as dogs in litter.

The smooth speeches of men are nothing unlike the vanishing clouds of the air, which glide by degrees from place to place, till they have filled themselves with rain, when, breaking, they spit forth terrible showers: so men gloze, till they have their answers, which are the end of their travel, and then they bid modesty adieu, and entertaining rage, fall a-railing on us which never hurt them.... It is a wonder to see how men can flatter themselves with their own conceits: For let us look, they will straight affirm that we love, and if then lust pricks them, they will swear that love stings us: which imagination only is sufficient to make them assay the scaling of half a dozen of us in one night, when they will not stick to swear that if they should be denied of their requests death must needs follow. Is it any marvel though they surfeit, when they are so greedy, but is it not pity that any of them should perish, which will be so soon killed with unkindness? Yes truly. Well, the onset given, if we retire for a vantage, they will straight affirm that they have got the victory. Nay, some of them are so carried away with conceit, that shameless they will blaze abroad among their companions, that they have obtained the love of a woman, unto whom they never spoke above once, if that: Are not these forward fellows, you must bear with them, because they dwell far from lying neighbors. They will say *Mentiri non est nostrum* [we are not liars], and yet you shall see true tales come from them, as wild geese fly under London bridge. Their fawning is but flattery: their faith falsehood: their fair words allurements to destruction: and their large promises tokens of death, or of evils worse than death. Their singing is a bait to catch us, and their playings, plagues to torment us: and therefore take heed of them, and take this as an axiom in logic and a maxim in the law: *Nulla fides hominibus* [there is no faith in men].... I have set down unto you (which are of mine own sex) the subtle dealings of

untrue meaning men: not that you should condemn all men, but to the end that you may take heed of the false hearts of all and still reprove the flattery which remains in all....

OPHELIA & SUICIDE

As she declines mentally, her sense of self disintegrates. She withdraws into infantile, ritualistic behavior.

Types of Suicide:

active (or heroic): committed by individuals who have their wits about them.

passive (or hopeless): committed by individuals who *do not* have their wits about them.

Gertrude's Description of Ophelia's Death

Once Ophelia's grave is constructed as a waste dump, anyone can exploit it—Gertrude, for example. Consider the beautiful yet self-serving story she tells Laertes of his sister's death:

There is a willow grows aslant [across] the brook,
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream,
There with fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold [chaste] maids do dead men's fingers call them.
There on the pendant boughs her coronet [garlanded] weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook, her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds [tunes],
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element, but long it could not be
Till that her garments heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay [song]
To muddy death.

How, one may ask, does Gertrude know any of these facts about the manner of Ophelia's death? Surely she is not present when Ophelia lies drowning in this brook, and no one reports this scene to her, since, had she or anyone else been present, they would have done something to save Ophelia, or their efforts to do so would be part of this report. But obviously neither Gertrude nor anyone else was present, and this account (apart from the fact of death by drowning) is a fiction. But why such an elaborate one? Is the objective to create a beautiful memorial? To erase what Gertrude fears happened, and substitute in its place what she wants to believe happened? To create a quasi-legal representation proclaiming Ophelia's death an accident, not a suicide—a representation needed to gain

Ophelia at least the remnants of proper burial, and/or to prove the power of royalty to construct the reality it desires?

EARLY MODERN SUICIDE LAW

In the year 1000, a canon attributed to King Edgar reiterated an earlier 672 canon prohibiting normal funerals for suicides: "It is neither lawful to celebrate mass for one who, by any diabolical instigation, hath voluntarily committed murder on himself, nor to commit his body to the ground with hymns or any honourable rites." At the same time, an exemption was made for mad persons. In Bracton's later *Of Pleas of the Crown* (1250–56), we find: "But what shall we say of a madman bereft of reason? And of the deranged, the delirious and the mentally retarded? Or if one labouring under a high fever drowns himself or kills himself? Does one commits felony against the self, i.e., self-murder. It is submitted that he does not, nor do such persons forfeit their inheritance or their property, since they are without sense and reason and can no more commit a felony than a brute animal" (1968).