

Shakespeare's HAMLET

The lady doth protest too much, methinks. (3.2.233)

In the famous play within a play in act 3, scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Player Queen not only makes a passionate "show of protestation" in the introductory pantomime, but in the succeeding dialogue, she vehemently proclaims her devotion to her husband and her abhorrence of the very thought of remarrying were he to die. Among her other extreme statements, she says:

A second time I kill my husband dead
When second husband kisses me in bed. (187–88)

She concludes her protestations with the following lines:

Nor earth to me give food, nor heaven light!
Sport and repose lock from me day and night!
To desperation turn my trust and hope!
An anchor's cheer in prison be my scope!
Each opposite that blanks the face of joy
Meet what I would have well, and it destroy!
Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife,
If, once a widow, ever I be wife! (219–26)

When Hamlet asks his mother, "Madam, how like you this play?" Queen Gertrude rather naively remarks, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

On the surface this may seem like purely objective criticism. The reader or viewer might feel the same way—that the Player Queen is overacting, and that the unidentified author of this play, which Hamlet calls *The Mousetrap*, has given his female character too many words to express the idea that she could never consider marrying another man because she is so passionately devoted to her present husband. There is, however, a deeper meaning in Shakespeare's brilliant line of iambic pentameter, which has been quoted and misquoted, appropriately and inappropriately, in innumerable contexts.

It is a fact of human psychology that male viewers of a play or movie tend to identify with male characters, whereas female viewers automatically and unconsciously tend to identify with female characters. If, for example, Hamlet had asked Horatio what he thought of the play, it is unlikely that his friend would have made any comment about the Player Queen's dialogue or her performance. There are two male characters in *The Mousetrap* and only one female. Both males have more important roles; one of them is a king and the play is essentially about the murder of one man by another. Yet Gertrude has obviously focused her attention on the dialogue and behavior of the lone female character, and the only criticism she has to offer is that the Player Queen's protestations of love and devotion sound too fulsome to be convincing even to the fatuous Player King.

Shakespeare knew that Gertrude's comment would seem to come out of left

field and would have a jarring effect on his almost exclusively male audience at the Globe Theatre, since their attention would be focused on *five* male characters—the Player King, the Poisoner, King Claudius, who is watching the play with growing trepidation, and Hamlet and Horatio, who are covertly observing Claudius’s reactions. When Gertrude says, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” it is almost as if she has been watching an entirely different play.

One of the ways in which Gertrude is often misquoted is by changing her one-line critique to: “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.” By putting “methinks” at the end of the line, however, Shakespeare makes Gertrude sound modest and apologetic, as if she were saying, in effect, “I am a humble, inexpert woman and know nothing about artistic matters, but one detail strikes me as unrealistic.” A more knowledgeable person, such as Hamlet himself, would take a broader overview of the dramatic presentation, judging all of the actors, all of the dialogue, as well as the plot and the thesis.

Whereas the typical male viewer or reader, today as in Shakespeare’s time, probably accepts the protestations of love and devotion at face value, Gertrude automatically assumes that the Player Queen, her own counterpart, is simply saying what she knows her husband wants to hear. Only women understand women. When Gertrude observes that the lady doth protest too much, she is unwittingly exposing her assumption that, to use the vernacular, the lady is piling it on too thick; that a clever woman in such a situation would be guided by the principle that “less is more.” Like many other unsophisticated playgoers, Gertrude is judging the play as a real event and the Player Queen as a real woman.

Gertrude assumes that the Player Queen is lying because she unconsciously takes it as axiomatic that most married women systematically lie to their husbands, at least in certain areas, and that most widows would remarry if they had an offer that seemed advantageous. (This, apparently, is what Shakespeare himself believed, as he demonstrates, not only in *Hamlet*, but in *Richard III* when Richard woos and marries Lady Anne, who knows that Richard has recently murdered her husband Edward, Prince of Wales.)

Hamlet’s mother is probably also taking it for granted that *The Mousetrap*, like most plays, was written by a mere man who understood nothing about a woman’s psychology or a woman’s helpless dependency in a patriarchal society. The play within the play may have been written by such a man, but the play itself, *Hamlet*, was written by a man who was preeminent in his understanding of human nature.

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WORK CITED

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Yale UP, 1947.