Introduction to Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is one of the most progressive and dynamic modes of literary theory. However, there is no precise definition of feminist theory. In the most general sense, feminist theory serves to promote female identity, argue for women’s rights, and promote the writings of women. As a literary theory, feminist theory critiques the structures within cultures and societies which organizes sexual and gender identities as an opposition between men and women. Feminist theory offers critiques of male-centered modes of thought and often concentrates its attentions upon female authors and the experiences of women. Feminist theory also closely examines the role of women in the development of popular culture, explores the question of whether a particular female language can be said to exist, and considers the construction and meanings of different notions of womanhood and gender roles throughout history. What is known as “French feminism” positions the identity of “women” as being a radical political, cultural, and social force that serves to reject and subvert assumptions linked to male discourse and masculine forces of political power. A number of feminist theorists reject a number of the fundamental notions of psychoanalysis and contend that such is male-biased, anti-women, and patriarchal. It can be argued that there is no such thing as feminist theory per se, rather feminist theory is grounded not in any sort of singular theory but linked to a variety of different literary theories.

Application in Shakespeare’s Hamlet

A feminist theory based interpretation of Hamlet would focus, most particularly, upon the characters of Ophelia and Gertrude. In fact, hundreds of feminist theory chapters and articles—as well as several academic studies—have focused upon the character of Ophelia. A feminist theoretical reading of Hamlet might argue that Ophelia—who is driven to seeming madness throughout the play and, possibly, eventual suicide—is figured as being repressed, abused, ignored, and renounced by male characters throughout the play because of her gender. Ophelia, then, represents a lack of consideration given to the feminine in the world of the play, as well as the inability for male characters within the play to understand the plight and psychologies of women. This sort of feminist reading of the play positions the world of Hamlet as being decidedly sexist and masculine and suggests that the play offers, then, a critique of a male-dominated and patriarchal society. This sort of feminist approach might suggest that the female characters in the play are used to critique the sort of male dominated society in which Shakespeare himself lived. While some feminist theorists have suggested that Shakespeare demonstrates a sexist ideology within the play, most feminist theorists view the play as asserting a somewhat enlightened and progressive view of women, with the play itself serving as a critique of a male dominated society. Other feminist
theories have argued that Hamlet himself is figured as a woman in the text, for he violates patriarchal power and rule and is subjected to the political force of a patriarchal power that denies him his intrinsic human rights and desires. A feminist theorist might argue that Shakespeare places Hamlet in the position of a woman in the play in order to critique and examine the nature of patriarchal power.

**Study Questions:**

1. What are the goals of feminist theory?

2. How does feminist theory critique standard modes of male-dominated political, social, and cultural powers?