

## DISCOVERING FEMINISM THROUGH GERTRUDE AND OPHELIA IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

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### ABSTRACT

As an iconic and suggestive author in terms of informing readers about the issues in women's studies and gender ideology, William Shakespeare's works have been analysed and approached through multiple theories. Despite Shakespeare's works which reflect and at times support the stereotypes of the roles of women and men in the English Renaissance period, Shakespeare is also a writer who questions, challenges and modifies those depictions. In his play *Hamlet*, many issues as well as controversies arise from the text, and one of them is feminism. The portrayal of Shakespeare's female characters and the plots surrounding them are considered as anti-feminist due to either the role that the women play or how they were referred to within the text. The root of this belief is the women in *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Ophelia, are given demoted opinion and roles within the play. The play is from a male-centred viewpoint thus it exclusively focuses upon the male characters and their experiences instead of assimilating the view and impacts of the women as well. This leads to assumption that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* with the need to display male dominance. Subsequently, *Hamlet* could be perceived as a test towards feminist approach because some academicians believed that Shakespeare wanted to make the world aware of the belittlement of women.

**Keywords:** *Gertrude, Ophelia, feminism, anti-feminism, Hamlet*

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### 1. Introduction

Leonard Tennenhouse, author of *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, concurs that Shakespeare was unmistakably a Renaissance individual and dramatist, and his writing cannot be separated from this point of view. Tennenhouse likewise proposes that Shakespeare's writing uncovers the characters of the Renaissance world and in addition it depicts individual characters in the plays. His written work gives a chance to look at social viewpoints during and after Elizabeth's reign.

Shakespeare opens a window on the way of the Elizabethan world (Tennenhouse, 2005).

In the play *Hamlet*, many controversies arise from the text and one of them is feminism. Feminism is a form of collective movements that aim to define, establish and defend the equal political, economic and social rights as well as equal opportunities for women. The major concern of these collective movements is in dealing specifically with the problem women face in overcoming social barriers. Apart from this issue, feminism is also concerned in liberation of both men and women from traditional cultural roles (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2005).

Through analysis on the only female characters; Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet*, certain distinctions can be made. By focussing on their action and speech as well the exchanges between them and the men in their lives, these various distinctions lead to the idea that Shakespeare chose to make *Hamlet* into an anti-feminist text. The roots to this notion are that the female characters are given demoted opinions and roles within the play. Aside from that, the play is from a male-centred viewpoint, and that it exclusively centres upon the male characters as well as their encounters as opposed to assimilating the perspectives and impacts of the women (Showalter, 1992).

## 2. Gertrude's Portrayal in *Hamlet*

Gertrude could be viewed as an epitome of lesser and negative stereotypes of women shaped by the patriarchal values and society of Shakespearean time. Within the play, she represents many roles; she is Hamlet's mother and the Queen of Denmark. She is also the widow of the Ghost (King Hamlet) and Claudius' wife.

Gertrude is presented in the play as an incestuous woman who only seeks for affection. Her act of hasty marriage to her brother-in-law Claudius, less than two months after the death of her husband is condemned by Hamlet as akin to committing incest;

“She married. O, most wicked speed, to post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (Act I, ii, 1579)

The canons of those periods viewed such marriages as incestuous, thus prohibited. This includes marriages among royalties as well as aristocrats. One apparent example took place in an incident in 1392, when Bernard, the Count of Armagnac, was refused papal permission to marry his elder brother's widow (Archibald, 2001). This canon however, proven to be vary and changeable when in 1500, Emanuel of Portugal was allowed to marry his deceased wife's sister (Archibald, 2001). Moreover, in *Hamlet*, only the Ghost and Hamlet call the marriage as committing incest (Güneç, 2015). Nonetheless, this opinionated male viewpoint is enough to place Gertrude in a negative predisposition.

Gertrude could also be considered as a voiceless and silenced female because she does not have many lines in the play (she does not speak much), thus depends on the male characters, Hamlet, Claudius and the Ghost, to describe and shape her behaviour (Güneç, 2015). The audience do not hear enough of her voice, more so her thoughts. Marvin Rosenberg in *The Masks of Hamlet* states that Gertrude's critics “judged her in two ways: by her silence and by what others say of her” (1992). Her “lustful nature” as described by Hamlet and the Ghost for example, has been accepted without question by many (male) critics although she herself has never given the audience any sign of being

lustful (Levin, 2008). Her silence could probably be deemed as one of the many signs of frailty by Hamlet, who has great contempt on her marriage and also her most boisterous critic (Al-Ali, 2015), when he spewed his most famous notion of women's frailty, "frailty, thy name is woman!" (Act I, ii, 1579). Her silence is meant to show her weakness.

Moreover, in the eyes of Hamlet, Gertrude is guilty and is blamed for being the source of problems in Denmark (Güneç, 2015). She is guilty for not properly grieving King Hamlet as Hamlet himself mourned;

"O God, a beast, that wants discourse of reason,  
Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle," (Act I, ii, 1579)

Gertrude is referred to as "a beast" that lacks the faculty of reason or common sense by marrying her brother-in-law shortly after her husband's death. According to the canons, Gertrude should mourn King Hamlet for at least half a year, wear mourning clothes for two years, and cannot participate in public for at least one year (Güneç, 2015). Instead, she even asks Hamlet to "cast thy knighted color off" (Act I, ii, 1577), to stop wearing black mourning garments and to "not forever with thy veiled lids" (Act I, ii, 1577), to stop lowering his eyes (a look of sadness). This seemingly nonchalant conversation with Hamlet is a preamble to Gertrude being viewed as a shallow, guilty woman who only has desire to maintain her high station.

As Emily Graf states in *Gertrude's Role in Hamlet* (2013), "...she (Gertrude) is also guilty of theoretically taking away Hamlet's heirship." This is because if Hamlet remains unmarried and childless, then Claudius and his offspring are next in line of succession to the throne of Denmark (Jardine, 1989). The possibility of the law of inheritance to not favor Hamlet and an heir that will surpass Hamlet's right to the throne shows that indirectly, Gertrude could be charged as a guilty woman that causes problems in Denmark. According to patriarchal canons, Gertrude should have been the one who defends Hamlet's heirship until he inherits the kingdom, yet she chooses love over her duty (Graf, 2013). In both situations, Gertrude will still maintain her position as the Queen (when she married Claudius) and mother of future king, regardless whether the king is Hamlet or her son with Claudius.

### 3. Ophelia's Portrayal in *Hamlet*

The patriarchal society of Western culture held powerfully negative implications over women. In this way the freedom for women to express themselves was not considered by men. Unfortunately, the male regard for females was, connected with the female body. Thus it was acceptable that the female body was a man's "property" and the dominance over women was a life goal for men in the Renaissance age (Ortiz, 2013).

Hamlet's sexual conversation with Ophelia during the Mousetrap scene would have been acceptable to a Renaissance audience.

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?  
Ophelia: No, my lord.  
Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?  
Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.  
Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs. (Act III, ii, 1622)

It appears to a modern day audience that the “noble” prince shares a very inappropriate joke with Ophelia. In Elizabethan slang, “nothing” was a term for the female genitalia. Thus “nothing” is what lies between maids' legs, portrays the male visual system of representation and desire, women's sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, “represent the horror of having nothing to see” (Showalter, 1992).

When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that “Her speech is nothing,” mere “unshaped use.” Ophelia's speech thus represents the fear of having nothing to say in the public. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, “the cipher of female sexuality to be deciphered by feminist interpretation” (Sonnenschein, 2007).

Hamlet wields the power of words as weapon and uses them against Ophelia. Overall, a direct impact on the women in the play comes from powerful use of words. Hamlet and other male characters such as Ophelia's father and brother, scold Ophelia as if she were a child. They disrespect her as if she is less of a person than they are. At one point Ophelia was told that she should be in a brothel instead of being a “breeder of sinners” (Act III, i, 1617) (Floyd-Wilson, 1992).

“Get thee to a nunn'ry.” (Act III, i, 1617)

The term “nunnery” does not mean to have a religious connotation, but is used to disrespect and lash out on innocent Ophelia. In this scene, the hate towards women is amplified. As the play progressed, Hamlet constantly keeps showing his feeling of dissatisfaction with the idea of women altogether. Hamlet speaks to Ophelia offensively so she will not become a “breeder of sinners”(Act I, i, 1617), because he believes that the sins committed by a child is because the mother is the true sinner (Floyd-Wilson, 1992).

“Frailty, thy name is woman!” (Act I, ii, 1579)

The above quote expresses Hamlet feeling that all women are weak. Ophelia is surrounded by powerful men and these men in her life ultimately become the cause of her madness. Ophelia's portrayal of madness comes into an unusual form which is through song. Ophelia's death is not represented on stage renders the image of Ophelia singing as less precarious. A speech made by Gertrude only recounts the girl's death and “marks a crucial moment in the play's response to the threats of excess and disorder embodied in Ophelia's music” (Romanska, 2005). Romanska further elaborates that, Shakespeare made the decision to reduce Ophelia significant as a feminine representation by cutting her death from the play's climax and including Gertrude's patronizing speech about it.

Thus, the character of Ophelia may be portrayed in two senses through her maddening song as an expression of female opposition to male dominance or merely as an insignificant sexual object. Either way, Hamlet is primarily about male superiority and Ophelia provides perfect evidence for this statement. No representation of her own character, insufficient lines to explain her own actions and thoughts, and the reduction of her only power which is her music all lead to the conclusion that Shakespeare wrote Hamlet as an anti-feminist text.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Hamlet* is a remarkable testimony of Shakespeare's craftsmanship that thrust the anti-feminist idea of its era. Through ample textual proof in the play, the idea of the belittlement of women is played over and over again. Audience are reminded that both Gertrude and Ophelia are unadulterated depiction of how women are negatively portrayed in the patriarchal world of Shakespearean time. Gertrude is perceived as lustful and incestuous – for marrying her brother-in-law, a silenced female – whereby her words are limited thus her behaviour is shaped by the words of the men around her, a “beast” that is blamed for the problems that befall Denmark, and a shallow woman whose only care is her high station. Ophelia's sexuality meanwhile is viewed in abhorrence by Hamlet. Ophelia's body (female body) is seen as a property, as “nothing” and, like Gertrude, so does her language, deprived and voiceless. She was seen as a lesser being, treated like a child and her death was absent from the stage – a further testament that she was of lesser importance and “nothing”.

Gertrude and Ophelia remain Shakespeare's iconic “drama queens”, painted biasedly by the bard to serve as a reminder that he wrote *Hamlet* with an assumed intention that it would one day become an anti-feminist text.

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