

Woman Frailty in Shakspeare's "Hamlet"

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Abstract

In the medieval world, it was considered disgraceful for a woman to go on the stage, while the patriarchal society of the western world had powerfully negative implications for the freedom of women to express themselves, and male considered them as part of his property ⁽¹⁾. In the time of William Shakespeare acting was considered to be a man's profession, and so women's roles were generally played by men and boys. Boys were often recruited for performances from the choirs of London churches. Many of these boys acted their parts very well and all were accepted by Elizabethan audiences, unlike women who were almost exclusively

banned from appearing on stages as actresses up until approximately 1660. The British prohibition of women actresses was ended in the reign of Charles II (1613-1685) who enjoyed watching female actresses on stage.

Shakespeare intended to display definite feminist roles with his female characters – Gertrude and Ophelia particularly in his tragic play , Hamlet, although he does not write the story about these women.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1960s, equality of men and women has become a major world issue. Critics have taken different stances in the

analysis of both male and female characters in literature. Shakespeare, one of the world's most renowned play-wrights, does not escape this scrutiny. He intended to display definite feminist roles with characters Gertrude and Ophelia, although he does not write the story of the play 'Hamlet' about these women, or he does not intend to display feminism and the evils of male dominance. This typical interpretation of these two women displays them as frail, sexual and dependent ⁽²⁾. Shakespeare shows misogynistic tendency with Gertrude and Ophelia ⁽³⁾. He has been called proto-feminist and antifeminist ⁽⁴⁾.

It has been generally believed that males stand as opposed to females physically, intellectually and emotionally. Man is supposed to be strong, courageous, rational and sexually aggressive, while woman is weak, timid, emotional and sexually passive. Their

actions show them to be very passive hardly strong, independent women ⁽⁵⁾.

In the 20th century feminist critics opened up new approaches to Gertrude and Ophelia. New historicist and cultural materialist critics examined the play 'Hamlet' in its historical context, attempting to piece together its original cultural environment. They focused on the gender system of early modern England, pointing to the common trinity of "maid, wife or widow", with "whores" alone outside of the stereotype. In this analysis, the essence of "Hamlet" is the central character's changed perception of his mother as a whore because of her failure to remain faithful to Old Hamlet. In consequence, Hamlet loses his faith in all women, treating Ophelia as if she too were a whore and dishonest with Hamlet. It is impossible, by some critics, to link honesty and fairness, since "fairness" is an outward

trait, while "honesty" is an inward trait.

The Leading Ladies in "Hamlet"

2.1. Gertrude's Marginality and Frailty

2.1.1. Gertrude's Moral Fiber

The woman –Gertrude– is treated as a marionette, who is easily manipulated by those around her. Her behavior portrays the frailty of her character. She displays distinct aspects of frailty, moral frailty, as she does not contend to common rules and beliefs. She hastily marries Claudius, longing for the affection she loses when her former husband is murdered. She is oblivious to the fact that her marriage to her brother-in-law is immoral, but she marries him to maintain the protection and affection that she desperately needs. Although Gertrude is

the Queen of Denmark, she does not have a strong presentation. Frightened of arousing contradictions, she allows the court without consulting her. So she has a subordinate and submissive position. Gertrude is a woman who values status and affection more urgently than moral righteousness and respect. She transgresses the patriarchal bounds of femininity by marrying so soon after her former husband's death and not remaining in passive grief and obedient devotion to his memory.

From the text, it is possible to see that Gertrude is a highly sexual woman, "O, most speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (1.2.157). she has got married again within a month of her first husband's death. The haste in which she married again was most sinful. Such conduct is not good, and it can never lead to any good results. She is an embodiment of weakness.

Must I remember? Why, she
would hang on him,

As if increase of appetite had
grown

By what it fed on: and yet,
within a month -

Let me not think on't -
Frailty, thy name is woman!

A little month, or ere these
shoes were old.

(1.2.143-147)

In the essay "Hamlet and his problems" T.S. Eliot suggests that the main cause of Hamlet's internal dilemma is Gertrude's sinful behavior. He states, "Shakespeare's Hamlet... is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son."

2.1.2. Gertrude's

Obedience to Claudius

In Shakespeare's "Hamlet" Gertrude is as often victim as heroine that she is inevitably defined and define herself in relation to men - most often

to men she loves. Gertrude embodies exactly this appropriate obedience. "I shall obey you," (3.1.37). she characteristically tells Claudius as she acquiesces in his plan to trap Hamlet, (3.1.38-42).

Gertrude is a simple hearted woman whose sole emotion is one of sensuality which hides her good qualities. This also makes her a rather easy victim to any witty man. She depends on her husband for advice and insight to Hamlet's attitude. She is objectified by Claudius considering her as one of his possession. This suggested that Gertrude is used by Claudius to get to the throne, because she is the type of woman that cannot survive without a man in her life.

Gertrude is often interpreted as an adulterate, incestuous woman. Catherine Belsey states that typical interpretations of Hamlet maintain: Gertrude... (as) a

slut; ... and Shakspeare (as) a patriarchal bard ⁽⁶⁾. It seems prominently that Gertrude is to be a highly sexual individual, running with Claudius and throwing herself on their bed, untying Gertrude's bodice ⁽⁷⁾. Hamlet once said in this regard:

... O, most wicked speed! To post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

(1.2.156-157)

Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an
esteamed bed,

Stew'd in corruption,
honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty

(3.4.93-96)

Most critics are sent into a frenzy, because they believe Gertrude to a highly sexual woman. These statements can imply that Gertrude was

sexually involved with Claudius before the untimely death of her husband, King Hamlet. This further involvement of Claudius and Gertrude also gives the impression that Gertrude was involved in the murder of her own husband, conspiring with Claudius so they could be together, to satisfy her sexual needs, or to give the underlying idea that Gertrude's main purpose in life is sexual.

Gertrude's actions show her to be very passive, hardly a strong, independent woman. Three times during the play, Gertrude is told to leave, and does so without hesitation. In Act 1, scene 2, Claudius and Gertrude ask Hamlet to stay in Denmark. After he agrees, Claudius says to Gertrude, Madam, Come, (122). Then again, Act 3, scene 1, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia and Gertrude are trying to find out the cause of Hamlet's distemper. Claudius says to her "O Gertrude,

Come away!" (28). This obedience is characteristic of a woman who is scared of going against the wishes of her husband, and against his male dominance. She does not seem to be aggressive and independent, rather, she appears to want to please everyone around her. Debra B. Bergoffen states, "her marriage to Claudius violates the father who has not been properly remembered, and it violates the son who is denied his legacy." ⁽⁸⁾ So her marriage to Claudius appears "unlawful" by the early modern period's standards and it "deprives Hamlet of his lawful succession." ⁽⁹⁾ Gertrude "has participated in the remarriage – has (literally) alienated her son, an Old Hamlet's name" ⁽¹⁰⁾. To sum up this topic we can say that in the absence of her original husband to sate and govern her sexual energies, Gertrude is easily seduced, and her disorderly behavior damages the society as she

exists in a male-dominated world, where she is commanded by males and offered no privacy.

2.2 Gertrude's Submission to her Son, Hamlet

During the closet scene, Hamlet tried to make his mother aware of her wrongful actions, but she is unable to withstand the confrontation and breaks down. Hamlet verbally attacks Gertrude by saying:

Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an
esteamed bed,

Stew'd in corruption,
honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty
(3.4.92-96)

Gertrude feels guilt and pleases for Hamlet to stop insulting her relationship with Claudius and cries:

O speak to me no me

These words like daggers
enter in my ears.

No more, sweet Hamlet.
(3.4.94-96)

Gertrude does not have the strength to command her son to stop insulting her relationship. Gertrude becomes morally frail due to the fact that she is vulnerable to change for her environment – Hamlet, here, directs his fury towards his mother displaying his loathing of his mother (11). As Hamlet rails against his mother and even violently seizes her in Act III, she cries and in fear, “Thou wilt not murder me,” (3.IV.20-21), she betrays no knowledge of the murder. “What have I done, that thou dar’st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?” (3.4.38-39) Hamlet denounces her sexual passion, and she responds:

O speak no more.

Thou turn’st my eyes into my
very soul,

And there I see such black
and grained spots

As will not leave their tinct.

(3.4.88-91)

She admits her lust and sees
it as sinful.

Gertrude turns out to be an incomplete, insufficient woman because she is not meant to be a distinct creature:

Gertrude remains relatively opaque, more a screen for Hamlet’s

fantasies about her than a fully developed character in her own

right, whatever individuality she might have had is sacrificed to

her status as mother⁽¹²⁾.

Gertrude really feels ashamed of her behavior after Hamlet has spoken daggers to her. She appeals to him not to go on talking to her in this manner. She says

that he has turned her eyes
into her very soul when now
she sees.

O speak for me no more.

These words like daggers
enter in my ears.

No more, sweet Hamlet.

(3.4.95-97)

His bitterness leads him to
believe that all women are
untrustworthy. He believes
that "guilt" and "pollution"
exist in their behavior.

2. Ophelia's Iconography

3.1. Father-brother- daughter and patriarchal rule

When Shakespeare's
heroines began to be played
by women instead of boys, the
presence of the female body
and the female voice created
new meaning and subversive
tensions in these roles, and

perhaps most important with
Ophelia. Ophelia is most
persistently presented in
terms of symbolic meanings
(¹³). Her behavior, her
appearance, her gestures, her
costume, her pops are
freighted with emblematic
significance.

Ophelia, until her mad
scene, is dominated and
submissive, repeatedly an
object of male domination,
manipulation, and control (¹⁴).
Her father and brother
control her chastity; Claudius
uses her to trap Hamlet. She
is an obedient daughter who
is dependent on men in her
life. She looks to her father
and brother for guidance
while looking to Hamlet for
love and affection. Ironically,
she is denied the love that she
so desperately seeks from
Hamlet and the advice that
Polonius and Laertes give her
throughout the play. When
she recognizes a notable
difference in Hamlet's
character, she turns to her
father for advice and, after

being ordered to stay away from Hamlet and his tokens of false affection, reluctantly agrees to spy on Hamlet.

Ophelia always wants to please those around her, thus, she loses self-confidence and becomes widely dependent on the men in her life. Although she truly loves Hamlet, she becomes a puppet and follows her father's orders for confronting him (the nunnery scene) so that her father and Claudius can spy on him:

Ophelia, walk you here –
Gracious, so please you,

We will bestow ourselves –
Read on this book,

Thus show of such an exercise
may colour

(3.1.43-45)

She becomes a willing fool in the hands of her father and her brother. She is highly dependent on her father, thus to appease him and maintain the support that he provides

throughout her life. Ophelia is content on making personal sacrifices, such as refraining from returning her declaration of love for Hamlet. During a one on one conversation with his daughter, Polonius states:

I would not, in plain terms,
from this time forth

Have you so slander any
moment leisure

As to give words or talk with
the Lord Hamlet.

Look to't, I charge you. Come
your way.

(I.III.132.136)

Unquestioningly obeying their orders against pursuing a relationship with Hamlet, she rejects his advances, which of course she believes to be genuine, and thus when he pretends to be mad, she believes it to be her fault. Her speech reflects her deep and genuine sorrow:

And I of ladies, most deject
and wretched

That sucked honey of his
music vows

O woe is me.

(III.i.157.162)

Ophelia's feeling of guilt is
reinforced by Polonius's
insistence to King Claudius:

... But yet I do believe

The origin and
commencement of this grief

Sprung from neglected love.

(3.2.178-180)

Thus when Hamlet murders
her father, Ophelia enters a
double realm of guilt,
believing herself to be to
blame for both Hamlet's
madness and her father's
death. As a result she
becomes mad. When Hamlet
says, Ophelia "Get thee to a
nunnery" (3.1.121), and tells
her he no longer loves her,
Ophelia does not have the
willpower to speak up and

defend herself. This is due to
the fact that in his earlier
designs, she ending gifts and
promising marriage, as a
result he confuses her state of
mind. After Hamlet causes
the death of her father,
Ophelia descends to madness
and sings senseless songs:

Tomorrow is vaint
Valentine's day

All in the morning betime,

And I a maid at your window,

To be your Valentine.

(4.5.48-51)

which has nothing to do with
her father's death. Ophelia,
having no sense of direction,
looks forward to her brother
coming and stabilizing her
life for her as she says, "My
brother shall know at it,"
(4.5.70). All these show
Ophelia to have a pitiable
character and emotional
frailty.

When her father directs
her to distrust the man she

loves, to deny him, she directly says, "I shall obey, my lord," (1.4.136). Ophelia is stationed as a decoy to expose to her father and the king the disease of the man she loves. She is assured to bring about Hamlet's restoration. All her emotion is now helpless. Ophelia's love is exploited as soon as Polonius and Laertes learn of Hamlet's affection with Ophelia, they forbid her to develop her relation with him. Both, the father and the brother, see that her love will be futile. Laertes says in this regard:

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,

And keep you in the year of your affection

Out of the shot and danger of desire.

Laertes' warning to Ophelia to guard her own credulous weakness and Hamlet's aggressive desire seem conventional:

Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain

If with too credent ear you list his songs,

Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open

To his unmaster'd importunity.

(1.3.29-33)

Ophelia's submissiveness becomes evident when she first appears in the play. Her brother, Laertes tells her that Hamlet's apparent love for her is merely lust and that she should be on her guard against it. She readily agrees to do so. When he has gone and her father speaks to her on the same subject, she puts up a feeble resistance which collapses in an instant. When her father expressly forbids her to see Hamlet again, she yields without any struggle.

In the loss of all male figures to guide and support Ophelia, she becomes

“completely vulnerable to her own femaleness.” (15) She is a soft yielding creature, with no power of resistance. Polonius and Laertes show that she is naïve and that her behavior is unsuitable. Ophelia, daunted by there claims that she has mistaken Hamlet’s love, assumes, that her father and brother necessarily know best and replies simply “I will obey”. Shakespeare shows, however, that it is this obedience of Ophelia’s that leads to her own destruction, and illustrates that when the guiding male is like cynical Polonius or the unperceptive Laertes, the fate of the subordinate female is considerably threatened.

A central obstacle to affirming Ophelia’s existence as an independent character is that she appears to have no past. With Hamlet, we know through exposition of his father, his childhood and his education, and we see him in relationship to old friends. However, we have none of

these cues to give us a sense of Ophelia’s past. Elaine Showalter says in this regard:

Shakespeare gives us very little information from which

Imagine a past for Ophelia. She appears in only five

of the play’s twenty scenes; the pre-play course of

her love story with Hamlet is known only by a few

ambiguous flashbacks. ⁽¹⁶⁾

3.2.Ophelia’s Submission to Hamlet

Ophelia’s filial obedience leaves her vulnerable to the abuse of Hamlet, who accuses her of being unfaithful and deceptive. (Hamlet seems to know that Ophelia is a participant in her father’s spying). He accuse her (and all women) of being a “breeder of sinners” (3.1.122), and orders Ophelia to go to a “nunnery”.

Get thee to a nunnery.

Why would thou be a breeder
of sinners?

(3.1.121-122)

or, a cuckold (cuckolds were thought to have horns like monsters) because she would inevitably cheat on him. Ophelia is crushed by Hamlet's harsh behavior, especially when he says, "I loved you not," (III.I.119). she's also devastated that Hamlet, the man who once spoke to her with "words of so sweet breath" seems to have lost his mind turned on her.

Hamlet not the only one who defines Ophelia by her sexuality. Even her brother has something to say about it. In Act I Laertes dispenses advice to Ophelia on the pitfalls of premarital sex (for women, not men) in a lengthy speech that's geared toward instilling a sense of "fear" into his sister. In fact he tells Ophelia no less than three

times that she should "fear" intimacy with Hamlet. He compares intercourse to a "canker" worm invading and injuring a delicate flower before its bud or, "buttons" have had time to open while insisting at the same time, on Ophelia's chastity. Laertes takes a typical Elizabethan stance towards female sexuality – a "deflowered" woman was commonly seen as damaged goods that no man would want to marry.

Unfortunately, by being involved with Hamlet, Ophelia paid the ultimate price, death. She was manipulated and used as a pawn by not only Hamlet himself but by her father and the king. The reaction of Hamlet to her act of espionage causes her great turmoil and internal strife. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he does not and never loved her. This of course is not true, but he is so convincing in his seven tirade, that Ophelia believes every word that is

uttered from his mouth. Ophelia is so in love with the prince that her love for him proved to be her weakness and helped her to succumb to his ruse. He insults her by saying that she is promiscuous and not a maid. In Shakespeare's plays, maids were virgins. He tells Ophelia that she should get to a nunnery as quickly as possible so she can absolve her sins. Since she is a woman, she is at fault for not being a maid before marriage. But, since he is a man, he is not at fault and has nothing to worry about. Hamlet's tirade is too devastating for Ophelia and she becomes mad. It gets to the point of such extreme insanity that Ophelia commits suicide by drowning to escape from the knowledge that the man whom she loves does not requite.

Because of this scene and other discourse throughout the play, Ophelia proves how weak and

submissive she could be. Her character showed how men could manipulate women so easily and how they could be walked on. Some readers may be angered at the fact that she went along with the king and Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet so easily. Naturally, it would have been nice to see Ophelia refuse them and devote herself to the man whom she loved. But the reader must keep in mind of the time in which this play was set. Women hardly ever refused to do what they were told, especially from nobility or their father; in Ophelia's case both were demanding her to do so. She had no choice but to do what she was told and had to suffer the consequence. Ophelia truly loved Hamlet, and Hamlet truly loved Ophelia. But due to the circumstances with which they had to deal and the society in which they lived, there was no other way that this situation could have had another outcome. It was

characteristic of the times and of Shakespeare's writing.

3. Conclusion

Ophelia and Gertrude are both unappreciated women that are considered frail and weak-minded by the men in their lives. The two women live in the shadows of the male characters while their thoughts and opinions are oppressed by a patriarchal society.

Ophelia embodies the flaw of obedience, but deeper than that, the flaw of dependence. Ophelia is completely dependent on her father, Polonius, and proves her loyalty and dependence when she agrees to stay away from Hamlet and his false sentiments. Ophelia's actions show that she will do anything to please her father, even making a personal sacrifice which she does not agree with. Ironically, Ophelia's dependence upon the men in her life ultimately

leads to her tragic suicide. Each male character plays a key role in the cause of her suicidal death. While Laertes physically leaves Ophelia to live abroad, Hamlet abandons her as a lover and is at times ruthless and cold towards the innocent Ophelia. The last straw is the death of her father, who is perhaps the most influential man in her life. Polonius's controlling manner is irreplaceable and finally Ophelia realizes this:

I would give you some violets

But they withered all when
my father died. (5.1)

The violets symbolize faithfulness and they all died because Ophelia felt betrayed by the men in her life. Ophelia's death is a direct result of her dependence, which could be seen through her obedience and overall weakness of character.

Gertrude, like Ophelia, depends on her husband for

advice and insight to Hamlet's attitude. Gertrude longing for the attention that she loses when her former

husband died, quickly marries Claudius, her husband's brother.

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