

Misogyny in Hamlet

In the play, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, only two members of the cast are female characters. One, Gertrude, is projected as an incestuous, cold-hearted, whore. The other, Ophelia, is cast to be a naïve, spineless, and ultimately ignorant girl. Together, these women characterize the female gender in William Shakespeare's play. The role of women in Hamlet is nothing short of misogynistic, which makes the play dated.

The first woman introduced in the play is Gertrude, the Queen of Denmark. Although she is of high order, she casts a shadow of lewd and irreparable behavior. Shakespeare had the power to make Gertrude out to be a dignified character, even perhaps a martyr for Hamlet's cause (avenge his father's murder). However every time that she witnesses something that causes her concern, she refuses to stay strong in her opinion of critical matters. This lack of backbone is evident when Hamlet is accused of stalking Ophelia. The Queen responds to this accusation by saying "I doubt it is no other than the main, his father's death and o'er-hasty marriage" (Act II, scene ii. 56-57). It would seem natural that a mother would stand beside her son over the objections of her new husband, and certainly over a courtier, Polonius. However, the response from Polonius, backed by Claudius, is that Hamlet is truly in love with Ophelia and it is the root of his perpetuating madness. Gertrude simply does not have the gumption to stand up to these men, and she surrenders to their ploy.¹

Gertrude's behaviour is the first of many times that Shakespeare chooses to portray women as easy prey for manipulation by men. Shakespeare repeatedly characterizes women in Hamlet as simple minded, impulsive, and under the ownership of male figures. This lack of consciousness is blatantly evident in the opening act of the play when Gertrude is introduced as a lustful tramp, married hastily to Claudius. "With an auspicious and a dropping eye, with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, in equal scale weighing delight and dole"" (Act I, scene ii. 11-13)

¹ Heilbrun, Carolyn. "The Character of Hamlet's Mother." Shakespeare Quarterly (1957). 201-206

Hamlet's behavior contrasts sharply with the behavior of Gertrude, his mother, thus making her hasty marriage seem even more ill-conceived. Hamlet gets into a minor argument with Claudius, accusing him of being "a little more than kin, and less than kind" (Act I, scene ii. 65). After Claudius questions why Hamlet is still holding a grudge, Hamlet metaphorically stands by his deceased father and defends his honor, with an allegorical pun, stating he can't forget because he is his son.

Claudius: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet: not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.

Unlike her loyal son, Gertrude betrayed her husband's memory by re-marrying very quickly. Gertrude proves this herself by saying that the meat still hasn't gone bad from King Hamlet's funeral. "The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." (Act I, scene ii. 180-181) In Hamlet's anguish over his father's death, Gertrude does little to comfort him. Gertrude minimizes Hamlet's feelings and sides with Claudius, who ironically was responsible for the murder of Hamlet's father.² This indifference towards Hamlet's emotional despair encourages the audience to believe that Gertrude is nothing more than a wanton, possibly even more interested in the undefined powers of the throne. Shakespeare does an effective job in painting a picture of Gertrude as a poor mother, lustful lover, and possible adulterer.³

Although not a good role model in love, Gertrude attempts to give good wishes for the possibility of a kindred relationship forming between Hamlet and Ophelia.

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honors. (Act III, scene i. 38-42)

With Hamlet hurting from the loss of his father and the sudden remarriage of his mother, Ophelia would have been a candidate to bring him out of his cloaked darkness. However, Gertrude

² It should be noted that through this problem the conflict of Hamlet is staged, making Hamlet the protagonist, opposing the antagonist Claudius.

³ Heilbrun, Carolyn. "The Character of Hamlet's Mother." Shakespeare Quarterly (1957). 201-206

does nothing concrete to encourage Ophelia to pursue Hamlet. Polonius, who may want the throne for himself, hinders Hamlet's chances in this endeavor of a potential love by herding Hamlet away from Ophelia.

Shakespeare also portrays Gertrude as a non-perceptive mother. Typically, a mother knows her child better than anyone, but Hamlet is able to cleverly trick his mother into believing that he is actually insane. In response, she breaks a sacred bond of family by divulging to Laertes that Hamlet killed Polonius. By telling Laertes this, it sets him on an even more ambitious path of destruction in his attempt to kill Hamlet. Coincidentally, to make matters worse, Gertrude's actions lead to her own death, a poetic irony of fate. Shakespeare makes this farce come full circle with Gertrude dying, and he succeeds in proving that Gertrude's stupidity leads to her own death.

Hamlet's other female character, Ophelia, also experiences a violent death, made more memorable by the events leading up to it. Ophelia is a young girl, daughter of Polonius, and sister to Laertes, who both restrain her from independent thought. Moreover, under the control of Claudius, they prevent Ophelia from falling in love with Hamlet who could have ultimately overthrown Claudius.⁴ This prevention gives Hamlet a convenient excuse to go mad⁵ in order to further his scheme of getting even with Claudius.

This foul treatment clearly shows that Ophelia is an abused soul. Her own father initially ponders encouraging her to give favour to Hamlet in order for him to have a more stable tie to sovereign kin. Polonius only restrains himself from this stratagem, shrouding Ophelia from Hamlet's affection, because he does not want to fall out of the current favour of Claudius.⁶ This action shows how controlled Ophelia is by her father, being harnessed with no chance to run free.

Shakespeare has once again given an example of how women are controlled. Ophelia should be of the age where she can make her own conscious decisions about who she chooses to love. Instead, Shakespeare defers this decision to Polonius which is totally unnecessary and only

⁴ Wagner, Linda Welshimer, "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1963). 94-97

⁵ Hamlet does not actually go insane, but rather acts as a mentally disturbed individual in order to deceive his peers. With this deception people around him have lowered inhibitions when speaking. This allows Hamlet to hear things that he wouldn't be allowed to hear if he were perceived as normal.

⁶ Wagner, Linda Welshimer, "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1963). 94-97

makes matters in Ophelia's life more complicated. This reliance on her father's governance places Ophelia in a vulnerable position.

It is painfully obvious that Ophelia turns to madness because of her father's untimely death.⁷ This fact is shown when she is whimsically handing out flowers during the time of her lunacy to her brother Laertes. "I would give you some Violets, but they wither'd all when my father died" (Act IV, scene v. 179-180) This guilty plea is first person proof of Ophelia being confined by her father's dictatorship, her free will contained within the borders of his governing word. Although Polonius is the main perpetrator of the second class treatment of Ophelia, he is not alone.

Hamlet himself, who critics have debated to be a true lover of Ophelia,⁸ is shown to make her second in his consciousness, trailing the thoughts of his own self-righteous plots for revenge. Already of a frail mind, Hamlet toys with Ophelia, also of a frail mind, on multiple occasions. In the scene of the players (Act II, scene ii), Hamlet pays little or no attention to Ophelia and is more concerned with his alterations of the play, done for his own benefit, not hers.

Shakespeare also never includes Ophelia in any of Hamlet's soliloquies⁹, which are his most dramatic moments.¹⁰ Shakespeare sets to prove that Ophelia is a simpleton, a pushover with little or no self-esteem. When Shakespeare gave birth to a litter of characters, Ophelia was the runt, slow in mind, too constricted to take action. Shakespeare allows everybody close to Ophelia to walk all over her and never does her any justice. The best he musters up for her is a pitifully memorable death, going crazy and committing suicide long before it should be her time to pass.

Hamlet enacts many subtle examples in action of how the women are rarely shown, rarely spoken of, and are controlled. Although there is one very dramatic portion, a miniature climax, where rising action boils over in a fury of emotion. Hamlet is enraged with his mother, and all women for that matter, and speaks freely about it to his bosom buddy Horatio. This is the

⁷ Lever, J. W. "Three Notes on Shakespeare's Plants." *The Review of English Studies*. Oxford University Press. 1952. 117-129

⁸ Wagner, Linda Welshimer, "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1963). 94-97

⁹ Wagner, Linda Welshimer, "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1963). 94-97

¹⁰ Hamlet, William Shakespeare's. Screenplay by Branagh, Kenneth, dir. 1996. VHS. Columbia Pictures, 1996.

soliloquy with the greatest magnitude, where Hamlet uses a line of immense passion¹¹—“frailty, thy name is woman.” (Act I, scene ii. 146) To paraphrase this is to argue how fickle women can be in making their choices in love and lovers. It would also be assumed that this proverb is saying “women are weaker than men”¹² in regards to intimate relationships.

William Shakespeare is a tremendous candidate for the greatest playwright of all time. However, Hamlet is dated – today’s society would view the play’s portrayal of women as old-fashioned. It is unfathomable to believe that a woman can not think for herself and must be instructed on her every move, in the most infantile of tasks. Gertrude could have been portrayed as a wise, loving mother and protector of Hamlet. She could have righted her perceived wrongs of a quick marriage to Claudius by providing poetic justice for Hamlet in helping him overthrow the king. She is more concerned however with keeping her marriage to Claudius strong. By aligning herself to Claudius she has status and power, which could be lost if she sides with Hamlet. It would still seem more plausible for a mother to side with her child, regardless of the circumstances, in any period of time.

Ophelia is cast in a role of youth, grace, and beauty, which would be the stereotype of a fitting mate for a Prince. Shakespeare instead uses her as a plot device,¹³ placing her under the frugal rule of her self-serving father, and upon his death, she has no reason for living. Ophelia should have been able to join Hamlet in a nuptial arrangement and this would have been of greater benefit to her father. However once she loses her father and Hamlet, she loses herself. Her status in the court is only through her relationship to these men, and without them she is nothing more than a lost little girl.

Although Shakespeare chooses to reduce women’s status to an extension of their male counterparts, he has some justification in doing so. The women are devices in the plot, used as

¹¹ Hamlet, William Shakespeare’s. Screenplay by Branagh, Kenneth, dir. 1996. VHS. Columbia Pictures, 1996.

¹² The New Dictionary of Cultural literacy, Third Edition. Edited by Hirsch Jr., E. D., Kett, Joseph F., and Trefil, James. 2002. Houghton Mifflin Company.

¹³ Wagner, Linda Welshimer, “Ophelia: Shakespeare’s Pathetic Plot Device.” Shakespeare Quarterly (1963). 94-97

excuses to move this already ludicrous play further into insanity. Even in developed countries on the 20th century women were still not allowed to vote, or hold office. In *Hamlet* both women have some form of power, even if it is through men.

In Shakespeare's time women did not have the equality they receive today. Shakespeare reflects this in showing that they are attachments to the powerful men of their time, and perhaps without these attachments the women would just be peasant surfs. Shakespeare, although it is not acceptable today, was most likely reflecting the status of women during his time.

The role of women in *Hamlet* is nothing short of misogynistic and cruel, which makes the play dated. If women were not demoralized, *Hamlet*, one of the greatest works of the stage, would not be marred by incestuous, and insane female characters. With a 21st century perspective of women, *Hamlet* could in fact have been a play governed by justice and beauty in love.