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Gertrude's Role in *Hamlet*

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Gertrude's Role in *Hamlet*

Abstract

Typically, Gertrude's character in productions of *Hamlet* has been limited by her guilt and sexuality. However, lacking the social and political conventions that confined Elizabethan England, it would seem that there is another possible interpretation of Hamlet's mother.

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GERTRUDE'S ROLE IN HAMLET

By

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Introduction

Although much has changed in the way that we read, view, and understand literature in the past 400 years, it often seems as though some things have stayed the same. The world of literary criticism has gone through many changes and philosophies, switching between different schools as the ideologies of the people and the times change. However, through all of these changes, one thing that has remained relatively the same is the way in which the character of Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is read and understood. Typically, Gertrude's character is analyzed and determined to be a sensual being who, overcome by her overwhelming libido, remarries quickly to her husband's brother and murderer after King Hamlet's death. This is an almost universally accepted understanding of Gertrude, which does not seem to have changed, regardless of the time period or school of critique. What is particularly strange about this interpretation of Gertrude is that current readers lack the understanding of the social and political expectations that determined Gertrude's guilt when the play was originally written over 400 years ago. Despite this lack of understanding, readers still accept and even encourage this understanding of Gertrude's character.

While this is a typical interpretation of a reading of Gertrude and an almost expected portrayal in films and plays, I would argue that there is more to Gertrude than her sexual desires. Using critical review and close readings of *Hamlet*, I will argue that Gertrude, despite the interpretations of the men surrounding her, is an independent character who is capable of making her own decisions. Instead of marrying Claudius because of her lack of self-control, I would argue that Gertrude is in fact protecting her son from the man who murdered her husband, the King of Denmark.

To argue my analysis of Gertrude and Hamlet, I will first discuss the woman whom I believe to be the model for Shakespeare's powerful females, like Gertrude. A female ruler of the patriarchal society that was 16th century England, Elizabeth affected the life of many authors and playwrights, not just Shakespeare. However, it is Shakespeare's attempt to understand a place for Elizabeth in his patriarchal society that sets the scene for characters like Gertrude. Next I will contrast the way in which Gertrude is read as guilty and the actual laws that blame Gertrude for her actions. A proper sense of the social and political expectations of this time period is necessary for readers to understand Gertrude's potential guilt. Finally, using a close reading of *Hamlet*, I will explain how Gertrude shows herself to be an independent, moral character, capable of making her own decisions, ultimately dying to protect her son.

Gertrude has been overshadowed not only in *Hamlet* but also in critical reviews of *Hamlet* for many years. I would argue that times have changed enough that we can now understand this elusive female character for who she truly is.

How are women regarded in Elizabethan England?

Often considered to be one of the most famous rulers in British history, Queen Elizabeth set quite a precedent as a female ruler of her time period. Ruling in a patriarchal age and country, Elizabeth had to find a way to calm the nerves of her people while maintaining her position as a figure of authority. As Richard Montrose explains in his essay, "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture," "The ruler's task is to *comprehend*—to understand and to encompass—the energies and motives, the diverse, unstable, and potentially subversive *apprehensions* of the ruled" (61). Elizabeth had to anticipate the fears and anxieties of her people and calm those nerves before they were allowed to be realized. It is important to consider Queen Elizabeth's role in Shakespeare's portrayal of women because she is the model upon which Shakespeare can build his reigning female characters, like Gertrude. As Montrose clarifies, "The interaction of characters in the fictive societies of Shakespearean drama... is structured by the complex interplay among culture-specific categories, not only of age and gender but also of kinship and class" (69). Shakespeare draws his characters and his plays from what he knows, from his life. Shakespeare develops his characters from what he knows and understands. Therefore, it is understandable to look first at Queen Elizabeth before looking to an understanding of Gertrude. Montrose's arguments relate directly to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also hold true to *Hamlet*: "The play is rather a new production of Elizabethan culture, enlarging the dimensions of the cultural field and altering the lines of force within it" (62). Just as Elizabeth explains the characters in Shakespeare's plays, these characters also explain Queen Elizabeth.

First, I would like to look at the general beliefs about women during this period. According to Lisa Jardine, the “standard authority” on scientific fact during this period was Aristotle, even though his time came much earlier than this period. Jardine quotes Aristotle’s “facts” about gender:

The female is less spirited than the male, ... softer in disposition, more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive, and more attentive to the nurture of the young. ... Woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory... (40)

Aristotle believes that there are distinct differences between males and females, both in physical nature as well as emotional tendencies. According to Aristotle, females tend to be more emotional than males while also being less energetic. It is uncertain what Aristotle used as evidence behind these theories, but it is obvious that these ideas relate to the common stereotypes about men and women that persist even today. However, the difference today is that most people understand that these are beliefs or opinions, not scientific fact based on extensive research and study.

Although Queen Elizabeth was unique in her time period as a powerful female, she did not necessarily believe that women should be seen as equal to males. As Montrose elaborates, “With one vital exception, all forms of public and domestic

authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, magistrates, lords” (65). With all forms of authority given to men except for the most important authority of all, the king of England, it is inevitable that there is tension caused by this situation. One might assume that a female who was able to take and keep power in a country for as long as Elizabeth did would have fought for the rights of females more. However, Elizabeth was more focused on not changing too much and maintaining formalities and structure as much as possible. Elizabeth anticipated the concerns that people would have about her ability to reign and chose to lessen that concern by not instituting a lot of changes during her reign. Instead, she focused on the roles that she could easily take over without causing too much concern in her people. Elizabeth, therefore, chose to “[reserve] to herself the traditional paternal power to give or withhold daughters. ... it was an institution over which a careful and insecure monarch might well wish to exercise an absolute control” (79). While this is a small power to hold, it was an important one, especially to the families of young royals. The ability to arrange and approve or disapprove of a marriage was integral in a young royal’s life. Much could be destroyed if Elizabeth decided against a marriage, so young women were especially careful around Elizabeth, determined not to upset her. Although this power is traditionally held by a father or paternal figure, Elizabeth chose to hold this power herself because it gave her almost absolute control over the single men and women of her court. Even though she chose to hold this paternal power, Elizabeth tended not to take over roles that were overly masculine, and she did not seem to favor female power, other than her own. For instance, as Lisa Jardine notes in *Still Harping on Daughters*, “none of the royal queens, or nearly-queens ever advanced (or even considered advancing) a woman

to any position of prominence within her administration except the traditional one of lady-in-waiting” (170). Although Elizabeth was unique in her period as being a female ruler not under the guidance of a male partner or husband, she did not believe that other women were capable of the same power, nor did she seem to believe in any sort of women’s rights. Like other royal females of her time, she never considered that other women could hold more powerful positions than that of a glorified servant, a lady-in-waiting. Elizabeth’s choice not to promote the ability and potential of women and instead to focus on her difference from other women is intriguing. As Jardine argues that Elizabeth’s choice “betrays all [the Elizabethan people’s] uneasiness about the instrumental power accorded to women in the period. It led to their reaching back into the literary past in search of representations which could redeem and enhance the majesty of the sovereign, *in spite of* her femaleness” (169). Instead of promoting the potential of females and their equality, Elizabeth separates herself from other females and focuses on her masculine mind of a king, which was given to her by god and her birthright. These symbols are particularly noted in her portraits, which will be discussed later. As noted before, Elizabeth anticipates the fears and anxieties of her people and responds to them before they are able to be realized.

Instead of focusing on the ability of a female to hold such a powerful role, Elizabeth relied on a series of symbolic references to solidify her appearance in the eyes of her people. Elizabeth, in many ways, was the ultimate player, masking herself in different ways to affect the most popularity and love while maintaining the respect and loyalty of her people. One of the ways in which Elizabeth often portrayed herself was as a vision of chastity, of female virtue. This was a particularly important image as

Elizabeth was unmarried. As Jardine explains, Elizabeth used chastity to divert attention from her womanhood: “alongside the rich literature for keeping women in their traditional place and attaching their many and varied supposedly innate vices, we find a thriving Elizabethan line in saving stereotypes: in portraits of female virtue so magnificent that they distract attention from their sex altogether” (173). The references that Elizabeth uses to portray herself are ancient references to mythical females from the stories of old. These references are well-known among the people and even loved by many, so they are understood easily. According to Jardine, “The female personification on which the cult of Elizabeth finally centred [sic] was Chastity” (175) and yet Elizabeth was also referred to as Pandora, Gloriana, Cynthia, Belpheobe, and Astraea throughout her reign (175). Elizabeth used these references to cement herself as ruler but also to represent herself in a way that was less threatening to her subjects. Caught in a patriarchal world but with a female ruler, Elizabethans would have struggled to come to terms with this. However, Elizabeth apprehends their fears by portraying herself in these ways so that they can understand the paradigm of her reign. This masterful choice also relates to the religious issues of the time period. Henry VIII had done away with Catholicism during his reign and much of the country was still coming to terms with these changes. As Montrose explains in “Shaping Fantasies,” “...Protestantism did away with the cult of the Virgin Mary. It meant the loss of ritual resource for dealing with the internal residues in all of us of the once all-powerful and all-inclusive mother. ...the royal cult may also have provided ... Elizabethans with a resource for dealing with the[se] internal residues” (63). Since the loss of the Virgin Mary, Elizabethans were no longer able to have a spiritual worship for a maternal figure. Recognizing this, Elizabeth placed herself in the

role of Mary by portraying herself as a chaste woman, a mother figure for the whole of England. As Montrose concludes, "Because she was always uniquely herself, Elizabeth's rule was not intended to undermine the male hegemony of her culture. Indeed, the emphasis on her *difference* from other women may have helped to reinforce it" (79-80). Elizabeth emphasized a vision of herself as the epitome of female chastity, a stand-in for the residual feelings of a maternal figure lost when the Virgin Mary was discarded along with Catholicism. Her use of these symbols and images created a place for herself in the minds of her people that was not one of uncertainty or questioning of her ability as a ruler. Instead, she apprehended the fears of her people by creating an image of herself which they could relate to and understand, as well as be able to find a place for her in their preexisting patriarchal paradigm.

The Queen did not always use the images of female chastity and virtue when representing herself to her people. Another reference that Elizabeth used, which is rather famous, is the idea of two bodies, separate within Elizabeth. While her physical body was female, her spiritual or mental body, which was the body that she used as ruler, was masculine. Therefore it was common to hear Elizabeth describe the frailty that was her physical, female body while at the same time reminding her audience that her mental or body politic, was masculine and strong, given to her by the will of God and the strong virtue of her lineage. The most famous speech of this sort was Elizabeth's speech at Tilbury, when she spoke to the soldiers who were waiting to stop the impending invasion by the Spanish Armada. As Montrose writes, "...she dwelt upon the womanly frailty of her body natural and the masculine strength of her body politic... 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of

England too.” (77). This contrast between her physical appearance and her internal ability was a contradiction necessary for this patriarchal society. In other words, Elizabeth told her subjects to disregard her physical appearance, which was that of a frail and weak woman, and instead to trust in her mental/internal body, which was that of a masculine, strong, king. Also, mentioning that her body politic was given to her by the will of God suggests that her reign is by divine right, an idea that was common and powerful, as it separated Elizabeth and other royals from the common people.

Since her appearance was of utmost importance to her reign, the portraits of Queen Elizabeth are of significant importance to an understanding of her symbolism and



Figure 1: *Armada Portrait*, George Gower, approximately 1588

near-obsession with her appearance. One portrait in particular that I will now analyze is the portrait commonly referred to as “The Armada Portrait” of Elizabeth I. Believed to be

painted around 1588, there are currently three remaining copies of this portrait, which depicts Elizabeth in all her finery. There is much in this painting that contributes to the imagery that Elizabeth so expertly arranged. For instance, one should notice the large ribbon tied in a bow near Elizabeth's skirt, which symbolizes her chastity. Also, the large pearls around her neck symbolize not only the wealth of England but also Elizabeth's innocence. These two symbols over-emphasize both Elizabeth's lack of husband and also her virtuousness. However, at the same time that Elizabeth emphasizes her innocence, the mermaid beside her seems to suggest that she does not lack the feminine wiles or the ability to attract men with her beauty. Just as the mermaids distracted sailors to their deaths with the mermaid's beauty, Elizabeth represents herself as a chaste yet beautiful woman. One rather noticeable image is that of the crown, which is not placed on Elizabeth's head as would be expected, but on a table next to her. It would seem as though Elizabeth were aware of her country's uneasiness with her role as queen and attempts to soothe their fears by representing the crown near her body but not directly on her head. Instead, she has a smaller, more feminine headdress to signify her power and position. Finally, the last image that is particularly important to Elizabeth's representation of herself and her position on the throne of England is the placement of the globe. Not only is the globe beneath Elizabeth's fingers, symbolizing the country's power over the world, but her fingers happen to be covering the Americas. Near this time period was the beginning of England's colonization of the Americas, so this particular placement suggests England's intent to become an imperialistic power throughout the world, particularly in the Americas. Each of these small parts in this rather large and busy

portrait distinctly relate to an aspect of Elizabeth's appearance and representation, which she strictly controlled.

While the Queen's portrayal of herself is intriguing, the greater question we seek to answer is, "Did it work?" Was the Queen able to reach the minds of her people to such an extent that they were able to understand and come to terms with the idea of a female ruler of their patriarchal society? Evidence would suggest that yes, the Queen was able to assuage the fears of her subjects. A French ambassador, André Hurault, was allowed to sketch the Queen, naturally, when she was about sixty-five years old. As Montrose mentions, "in the very process of describing the Queen's preoccupation with the impact of her appearance upon her beholders, the ambassador demonstrates its impact upon *himself*" (Montrose 64). Because this ambassador noticed Elizabeth's obsession with her image, we also note that the ambassador has been affected by this image of the Queen. In other words, we know that Elizabeth's grand portrayal of herself has made an impression on others. One individual "...wrote of Elizabeth as "oure deare Queene, my royale godmother, and this state's natural mother"; as "one whom I both lovede and fearede too" (Montrose 83). This reference to Elizabeth as the "natural mother" relates back to her portrayal of herself as a chaste woman, similar to the Virgin Mary. While Elizabeth was well-loved by her people, she was also respected as a ruler, as Sir John Harington mentions that they "fearede" her just as they admired her. Montrose articulates this point, writing, "By the skillful deployment of images that were at once awesome and familiar, this perplexing creature tried to mollify her male subjects while enhancing her authority over them" (78). Elizabeth's use of past imagery like the ones mentioned before (Pandora and Astraea, for instance) solidified her image as a chaste and mythical female, while

also giving her power over her subjects. Her power and authority were emphasized with her references to the difference between her body natural and her body politic. Elizabeth used this difference to force her subjects to overlook the physical image of her weak, frail, female body and instead imagine her inner strong and masculine body of a king. Lisa Jardine concludes from such evidence that "...it does appear that the creative effort which had gone into her iconography succeeded, if only for a moment, in disrupting the sustaining tradition of patriarchal emblems enough to unsettle and perturb two of the age's leading male poets" (195). Jardine refers in part to Shakespeare here, because she believes that he was affected by the Queen's imagery and "iconography." I would agree with Jardine, arguing that Shakespeare was affected by the society around him. I would also argue that this knowledge of the iconography of Elizabeth impacted the way that Shakespeare viewed powerful women, particularly the characters of his plays, such as Gertrude. Therefore, I believe that an understanding of Elizabeth's portrayal of herself is crucial to an understanding of Shakespeare's portrayal of Gertrude.

Also a queen, Gertrude holds a place of power in a similar patriarchal society. Shakespeare's ability to comprehend Elizabeth and her symbolic image allowed him to create a female in a powerful position as the queen of Denmark. However, Gertrude does not seem to have the same effect on her subjects as Elizabeth did in England. In fact, Gertrude lacks many of the features that Elizabeth used so strongly to her benefit. Perhaps it is a reaction to Elizabeth's rule that caused Shakespeare to consider the placement of a female in a role of power and authority; however, Shakespeare allows Gertrude to be overwhelmed and upstaged by the more powerful men around her.

Although I will discuss Gertrude's lack of control in later sections, this idea could stem from Shakespeare's understanding of Elizabeth's reign. Although Elizabeth was accepted and beloved as queen of England, it would seem that there is still a limit to the ability of women in this time period. Elizabeth contrasted herself from other women; Gertrude's difference from Elizabeth relates to her lack of power and authority in *Hamlet*.

Part One: How is Gertrude read and why?

Despite her limited speech throughout the play, Gertrude has been the subject of quite a bit of research and speculation. Much of the research tends to focus on Gertrude's sexuality and the potential strange and often-contested relationship between Hamlet and his mother. However, I will argue a different point, that the portrayal of Gertrude as a sensuous mother is inaccurate and contrived. Perhaps because Gertrude speaks so little and has no chance to defend herself against the accusations surrounding her, she is often portrayed in an unfavorable and exaggerated way. As Janet Adelman writes in *Suffocating Mothers*, "...[Gertrude] is preeminently mother as other, the intimate unknown figure around whom ... fantasies swirl" (30). Although Gertrude seems often to be merely watching the action unfold around her, she is the subject of quite a few of the words of the characters around her. The words of other characters both magnify and skew our interpretation of her character and choices. Though her lines are few, Gertrude is discussed quite often throughout the play, especially by her son, Hamlet. This focus of Hamlet on his mother is likely what has led to the vast amount of research that focuses on both Gertrude and her relationship with her son. Adelman believes that, "[Gertrude] is kept ambiguously innocent as a character, but [she is a part of] the deep fantasy that structures the play's imagery..." (30). Often Gertrude is read as a sensuous female, lacking in any of the qualities of a decent woman of her time or position. Although she seems to not have any part in the death of King Hamlet, she is seen as the root of the problems surrounding rotten Denmark. This reading is so common that it is often accepted without question, without further inquiry into why exactly Gertrude is understood in this way. It is not in her words that we find evidence of her sexuality or her

betrayal of her husband. Lisa Jardine explains her reasons for writing two books on this subject, writing that she would, "...have no difficulty in understanding the way in which to blame for the incestuous marriage entered into by Old Hamlet's brother, Claudius, is passed across to Gertrude as if she were its instigator" (*Reading Shakespeare Historically*, 148-149). In other words, Gertrude's guilt is based on her marriage to Claudius because the laws of that time forbid a woman to marry her husband's brother. Jardine goes further to explain that the problem is not so much with how Gertrude is portrayed but how she is read. Although we consistently accept the general belief of Gertrude as a sensuous being, this is no longer the cultural perspective. In other words, "... we have lost the ability to read the narrative which attributes blame to the initiator of an unlawful marriage" (Jardine 47). Most readers of *Hamlet* can agree that Gertrude is to blame, but that is no longer a cultural norm. Perceptions of female roles have changed in the past 400 years, yet we still accept the guilt of Gertrude.

In general, many would consider Gertrude to be guilty of not properly mourning her husband or of marrying Claudius. I would argue that Gertrude is considered to be guilty not by her own actions or words but by the words of two key characters, Hamlet and the Ghost. Between these two characters, readers receive an image of Gertrude that is sensuous and disloyal. Yet these two characters are what Richard Levin calls "unreliable narrators" in his article, "Gertrude's Elusive Libido and Shakespeare's Unreliable Narrators." Levin explains that most of Shakespeare's characters tend to be reliable in that the audience can trust what they are saying and doing to be true. Levin writes, "...dramatic characters...should be regarded as representations of real individuals who possess personalities and what we now call inferiority, which involves agendas,

emotions, and even internal conflicts that can affect the reliability of the statements they make” (312). In other words, characters in drama are to be seen as real individuals or as allegories from the medieval tragedies that Shakespeare inherited. Instead, characters should be understood as individuals with personalities that can change depending on the situation, just like real people. Since Shakespeare intends for his audience to trust his characters and their words for the most part, when a given character’s word is not to be taken at face value, Shakespeare prompts his audience by exposing the character’s true nature. This way, the audience will understand the actions of the character and not be duped like the other characters in the play (Levin 316). However, this is not always true. Shakespeare does not always paint his characters so black and white for the audience. As Levin explains,

...the characters ... possess an interior dimension, including personal agendas, attitudes, and feelings, that can influence the statements they make and can therefore affect their reliability ... This would seem to apply to the speeches of Hamlet and the Ghost... (317).

Levin argues that the speeches of both Hamlet and the Ghost should not be taken at face value because they are considered “unreliable.” Both Hamlet and the Ghost have reason to begrudge Gertrude, to portray her in an unfavorable light, as I will discuss in the following section. Gertrude’s guilt is not based on her own actions, words, or choices, but on the emotionally charged declarations of her late husband and her melancholic son.

First we will look at the Ghost and how his words help to determine the reader’s perspective on Gertrude’s character. A rather mysterious creature, the Ghost first appears

to guards Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo on the walls of the castle. Friends of Hamlet, these men recognize the Ghost as the recently passed King and warn Hamlet of what they have seen. Although the Ghost does not speak to the young men, he is able to speak with Hamlet. The Ghost explains that he is Hamlet's "father's spirit,/ Doomed for a certain term to walk the night/ And for the day confined to fast in fires/ Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away..." (1.5.14-18). He also explains to Hamlet that after the Ghost shares his story, Hamlet will feel the need for revenge. Yet although the Ghost explains that the problem is "murder most foul" (1.5.33), his speech seems to focus more on the marriage of his widow, Gertrude, to his brother, Claudius. The Ghost tells Hamlet:

With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts—

O wicked wit and gifts that have the power

So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust

The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.

O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there

From me, whose love was of that dignity

That it went hand in hand even with the vow

I made to her in marriage, and to decline

Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor

To those of mine!

But virtue, as it never will be moved,

Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,

So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,

Will sate itself in a celestial bed

And prey on garbage. (1.5.49-64)

These sixteen lines seem much more important to the Ghost than his brief explanation of his own murder, which comes after this speech. If the focus were his murder, as he explains when he begins speaking to Hamlet, then why does he begin with Gertrude's grievances? The Ghost seems much more preoccupied with the loss of his position with Gertrude than with the loss of his position on the throne of Denmark. Richard Levin writes, "The Ghost's grievance obviously is Gertrude's adultery, and his agenda is ... to explain it in a way that will completely condemn her role and Claudius's and valorize his own ..." (309). Instead of focusing on Claudius's murder, the Ghost focuses instead on Claudius' act of stealing King Hamlet's widow, Gertrude. To portray the situation in the worst light possible, The Ghost focuses on the contrast between his "celestial bed" that he shared with Gertrude and the "garbage" that is Claudius and Gertrude's relationship. While the Ghost does insinuate that it was Claudius who seduced Gertrude (not the other way around), he seems to not consider her passive, saying that Gertrude "sate [her]self in a celestial bed/ And prey[ed] on garbage" (1.5.62-64). Although the Ghost claims that Claudius did the wooing, it is Gertrude who receives flack for allowing Claudius to fill the role once filled by her virtuous and heroic husband, King Hamlet. The Ghost claims that Claudius forced Gertrude to degrade herself from the virtuous and pure love that she had for King Hamlet and debase to a lower form of lust, not love. The Ghost's version, Levin writes, "seems to have been filtered through and affected by his agenda because it makes him look as good as possible and makes Gertrude and Claudius look as bad as possible" (321). Here we see the blame shift from Claudius, the murderer, to Gertrude,

the lustful widow who is overcome by her inability to resist the charms of this lower class man. This relates to the popular stereotype of the time, that females were easily enticed by men of a lower station because of these men's more lustful character. Claudius, although he is of noble blood, is the second son and therefore lacks inheritance and potential—until the death of King Hamlet. As Claudius is of a lower station than his brother, the King, he is less capable of the kind of noble love of King Hamlet; that is, at least, according to the Ghost of King Hamlet. Therefore, he is able to seduce Gertrude after King Hamlet's death. And although the Ghost tells Hamlet, "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/ Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven/ And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge/ To prick and sting her" (1.5.92-95), the Ghost seems much concerned with Gertrude himself. Even though he does not want Hamlet to attempt to change Gertrude, the Ghost has quite a few words to say that relay his feelings about her seeming betrayal of their marriage, even going as far as to claim Gertrude and Claudius's marriage to be incestuous and adulterous. Although these words have different meanings in this time period, the accusations against Gertrude are rather high to begin this play.

Despite the Ghost's advice to Hamlet to ignore his mother's part in Claudius's new position in Denmark, Hamlet instead ignores the Ghost's counsel. Instead, he focuses almost entirely on his mother's actions, at times even disregarding Claudius. For instance, although he has the perfect opportunity to murder Claudius and avenge his father's death when he sees Claudius praying after the dumb show, Hamlet instead goes to visit his mother and lecture her on her behavior. This scene in Gertrude's closet is most often referenced by authors attempting to determine Gertrude's character or her relationship with her son. I would argue that the closet scene displays Hamlet's grudge

against Gertrude, revealing his unreliability as a narrator. When Hamlet explains to Gertrude what she has done that has so offended him (and his father), he says that she cannot claim that her relationship with Claudius is love because she is too old. He tells her,

If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
 To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
 And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
 When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
 Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
 And reason panders will. (3.4. 93-98)

Although he may have agreed to the Ghost's command to ignore Gertrude earlier in the play, he no longer can resist the temptation to lecture his mother for what he believes to be her misdeeds. As Levin explains, "The Ghost's grievance was that it made her disloyal to him and to his 'celestial' love, whereas Hamlet's grievance is that she is too old to feel lust ..." (312). Hamlet is concerned that his mother should be too old to feel these lusty emotions. Since she continues with actions that Hamlet deems to be too young for her old age, she is shaming herself in his eyes. Also, with this scene, we see that Hamlet is shifting his blame of the situation from Claudius to Gertrude. Instead of hating Claudius for the murder of his father, Hamlet has shifted responsibility to his mother for her misdeeds against King Hamlet. As Adelman explains in *Suffocating Mothers*, Hamlet seems to blame Gertrude instead of Claudius. The infamous line "A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother,/ As kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.34-35) seems to parallel Gertrude with the action of not only the murder of King Hamlet but also the

seduction of Claudius. Adelman writes, "... For Claudius's crime is nearly absent here: in Hamlet's accusation, Claudius becomes the passive victim of Gertrude's sexual will; she becomes the active murderer" (25). Once blame has shifted to Gertrude for a crime which Hamlet cannot even be sure that she had a hand in, the audience understands that Hamlet has lost credibility as a reliable narrator. His emotions and personal opinions have come too much into play and therefore, the audience can no longer accept his word as complete truth.

Gertrude's character is depicted less by her own words than by the characters, particularly the men, around her. Therefore, much of a reader's understanding of Gertrude comes from the descriptions of the Ghost and Hamlet. According to these narrators, Gertrude has committed a misdeed against her husband. The Ghost would argue that Gertrude was betrayed by her lustful nature and seduced by Claudius. Hamlet would argue that Gertrude is shaming herself, her dead husband, and her family, because of her actions since King Hamlet's death. Both of these narrators betray themselves throughout the play as dubious narrators. As Levin concludes, "[Neither] of [the accounts of Hamlet and the Ghost] can be considered objective, since they come from her son and her late husband, both of whom believe that they have been wronged by her, and each account is generated by and serves a specific agenda that is directly related to that wrong" (308). Once the audience has determined the fallibility of these narrators, the audience must determine for itself Gertrude's personality and potential guilt. However, I would argue that many readers and audiences tend to accept the untrustworthy accounts of these two narrators, instead of questioning their credibility. Therefore, it may be because of the words of these characters that Gertrude is often portrayed in theater and on screen as a

sensual character. Abigail Montgomery writes about this, saying, “Recent ... critics seem not so much to ignore Gertrude’s death and life as to see them in limited ways, reading her primarily in terms of her sexuality/marriage to Claudius and its effect on Hamlet” (99). Instead of seeing Gertrude in the perspective of untrustworthy narrators such as Hamlet and the Ghost, I would suggest viewing Gertrude as an independent being who is capable of making her own decisions. However, I must first contrast how Gertrude is understood, which I have discussed previously, with what Gertrude is actually guilty of, in terms of the social and political expectations of her time period.

Part Two: What is Gertrude actually guilty of?

I have discussed the way in which Gertrude is read and perceived to be guilty throughout *Hamlet* due to her bad press from both the Ghost and Hamlet. She is also the victim of many directors and actresses who choose to emphasize the sexuality of her character, often disregarding other aspects of her personality. I have argued that Gertrude may not in fact be guilty, considering that her two main accusers, the Ghost and Hamlet, offer biased perspectives of Gertrude's culpability. Now I will look at just what exactly Gertrude is guilty of, according to the conventions and social etiquette of her time period. To determine Gertrude's guilt, one must consider proper social etiquette, inheritance laws, and marriage laws.

Social etiquette laws were much more important in Elizabethan England than they are today. Texts such as books of manners often listed rules about deportment and behavior protocol. With such examples as Queen Elizabeth, there were strict rules that one must follow in every situation. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hamlet is so offended by Gertrude when she does away with her mourning clothes less than two months after her husband's death. What makes Gertrude's seeming lack of concern more noticeable is that Hamlet insists upon continuing to wear black to mourn his father, despite the rest of Denmark's court having put off this style. Lisa Jardine notes this difference in *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, writing "Indeed, what is striking about this first entrance is that it is entirely unexpected in revealing to the audience Claudius as King..., sumptuously, with Hamlet in mourning black. The prolonged mourning... insistently keeps the direct line, Old Hamlet/Young Hamlet present" (43). Despite Gertrude seeming to be unconcerned with the recent death of her husband, Hamlet insists

on remembering his father by following proper mourning etiquette. His insistence upon wearing black is like a visual reminder to all around him of his father. Therefore, when Hamlet wears black, he is representing his father, which contrasts Hamlet even more from the new king, Claudius. Although Gertrude's behavior would normally be a concern since it is against typical social conventions of the time, the rest of the court seems to follow Gertrude's lead in disregarding their mourning attire. Therefore, it would seem as though Hamlet, and not Gertrude, was in the wrong here. As Claudius explicates to Hamlet,

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
 To give these mourning duties to your father.
 But you must know your father lost a father,
 That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
 In filial obligation for some term
 To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere
 In obstinate condolement is a course
 Of impious stubbornness. 'Tis unmanly grief.' (1.2.90-98)

As Claudius explains, Hamlet's grief is too much. Although some would argue that Claudius, being the murderer of King Hamlet, wants the rest of the court to forget King Hamlet's untimely death as soon as possible, it may also be that Hamlet is truly overly sorrowful. The general rule of the time was that the mourning period would last for about six months. However, a widow was expected to wear mourning clothes for two years, and not partake in society for at least twelve months. According to these rules, Gertrude is guilty of not complying with expectations. However, since Claudius (the king) and the

rest of the court have put off their mourning clothes, Gertrude seems to have permission or exception for her actions.

Not only is Gertrude guilty of not properly mourning her dead husband, King Hamlet, but she is also guilty of potentially taking away Hamlet's inheritance: the throne of Denmark. Inheritance laws in Elizabethan England were rather convoluted, especially when more than one marriage becomes involved in the equation. According to Jardine in *Still Harping on Daughters*, there are two main types of inheritance during this time period: "In the sixteenth century, entailed land (land for which a strict sequence of inheritance was legally specified) either passed in *tail male* (from eldest son to eldest son) or in *tail general* (to the eldest child of either sex)" (85). However, since Gertrude has married Claudius, who is now king of Denmark, the throne would not pass directly to Hamlet automatically. Instead, the throne would pass to the offspring of Claudius and Gertrude's union. Jardine writes, "Gertrude is dowager queen during Hamlet's minority; in tail male the kingdom passes to Hamlet. But if Hamlet remains unmarried and childless..., then Claudius (his father's brother) and his offspring are next in line of succession to the throne of Denmark" (92). This knowledge into the inheritance laws of the time gives some understanding into Hamlet's preoccupation with Gertrude's sexuality. For if Gertrude is having sexual relations with Claudius, then Hamlet's inheritance and seat on the throne of Denmark is in jeopardy. Although this may only be a minor part of the play, it does provide a better angle on Hamlet's mysterious obsession with Gertrude's sexuality. It almost seems strange that women could potentially have such a powerful part in inheritance; however, the society also highly disapproved of a widow's second marriage. As Jardine explains further, "...the mother's 'duty' towards

her children is defined in terms of patriarchal linear descent: she is custodian of the carriers of the line” (81). In other words, Gertrude’s duty to Hamlet was to be a passive custodian to his inheritance, to guard the family line until Hamlet could gain the throne. However, by making the active choice to marry Claudius, she is abandoning her duty to her son and replacing it with a duty to her husband and their potential new line of inheritance together. Suddenly, Hamlet’s anger towards his mother and his obsession with her sexuality seems more practical and understandable. As Noel Blincoe describes Rosenblatt’s theory in her article, “Is Gertrude an Adulteress?”, writing that Hamlet’s anger and frustration rises from his being ignored by his mother after the death of his father (21). Also, Gertrude betrays Hamlet by marrying Claudius because her action is similar to replacing not only King Hamlet but also Hamlet. Gertrude is, in other words, guilty of disregarding her son entirely in favor of her new husband. This affront to Hamlet could potentially cost him the throne of Denmark entirely, which places Gertrude in quite a powerful position. Considering the beliefs of the time, it is quite possible that Hamlet is not only upset about being ignored and potentially displaced on the throne, but he could also be disturbed by the idea of his mother having power over his future. Since women were generally passive curators in the inheritance line, it is surprising that Gertrude could suddenly have so much power over Hamlet. As Jardine concludes, “Whether she has knowingly or unwittingly been draw [sic] into Claudius’s plot, she is guilty by virtue of her power to disrupt the patriarchal power structure *in spite of* her actual passivity” (93). Gertrude’s ability to interrupt and change the inheritance of the throne of Denmark gives her an astonishing amount of power, which also places her in contempt of the less powerful males of the court, particularly Hamlet, who could be in

jeopardy due to Gertrude's potential power. Because Gertrude is guilty of potentially upsetting the inheritance line, Hamlet's anger at his mother seems more understandable. Although she may not be guilty of all that Hamlet and the Ghost accuse her of, she is guilty in the sense that she has the power to take away Hamlet's inheritance by virtue of her sexuality.

Now that inheritance laws of Elizabethan England have been determined, it is also important to consider the rules of marriage in this time period. A classic example of marriage laws of the time comes from about one hundred years before Hamlet was written, with Henry VIII's infamous marriage to Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his dead brother, Arthur. Lisa Jardine comments on the laws of this time, explaining, "Notoriously, Henry VIII's marriage to his dead brother Arthur's widow, Catherine of Aragon, was incestuous under the Levitical tables of affinity" (40). There were strict laws about who could marry whom, and which marriages were considered incestuous. Henry VIII's marriage was considered incestuous by the Church, and caused some controversy over whether the marriage should be allowed at all. Today, the term incestuous generally refers to a relationship between family members and close relatives, such as siblings or first cousins. However, in Elizabethan England, the term had a much wider definition. Although Henry VIII was not marrying his sister, he was marrying his sister-in-law, even though Catherine's marriage to Arthur only lasted about twenty weeks. Like Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, Jardine explains, "In marrying Claudius, Gertrude was marrying her brother-in-law; and, according to [canon law], such a marriage was indeed incestuous and prohibited" (39). While Henry VIII's marriage was widely known as a potentially incestuous marriage and a problem with the Church, in

Hamlet, Gertrude's marriage is not seen in the same light. Only the Ghost and Hamlet comment on the incestuousness of Gertrude's marriage. It is possible that the rest of the court chooses not to comment, considering that they do not want to offend the new king. Regardless of the reason for the rest of the court's silence, according to the canon law of the time, Gertrude's marriage would be considered incestuous.

According to the etiquette and laws of the time, Gertrude would be considered guilty of several things. First, she is guilty of not following proper mourning etiquette by maintaining black clothing and a modest demeanor. Instead, within two months of her husband's death, Gertrude has discarded her mourning clothes and has remarried; both of these are affronts to the memory of her husband. Also, Gertrude is guilty of affecting the line of inheritance for the throne of Denmark. By marrying Claudius, Gertrude could potentially take away Hamlet's right to the throne because any child of Gertrude and Claudius's marriage would have the direct right to the throne. Finally, Gertrude is guilty of engaging in an incestuous marriage under the canon law of Elizabethan time in that she marries her brother-in-law. Each of these guilty acts gives a better illustration of the problem of Gertrude and why Hamlet and the Ghost are so offended by her behavior. It has often been discussed by many readers and critics whether Gertrude also committed the act of adultery, of having a relationship with Claudius before the death of King Hamlet. There is no evidence throughout *Hamlet* to suggest this could be true. Many have argued that Gertrude is guilty of having an affair with Claudius before King Hamlet's death. Instead, I have chosen to focus on what can be proved with evidence as signs of Gertrude's guilt. What is interesting about Gertrude's guilt in these areas is not so much Gertrude's guilt but Claudius's *lack* of guilt. As Jardine explains in *Reading Shakespeare*

Historically, "... the civil complexity of kin and inheritance obligations, under which Hamlet might claim a grievance (and proceed to law) against Claudius, is refocused as moral blame on the civically non-participating Gertrude" (46). According to the laws of the time, Hamlet's grievances would be with Claudius for his part in the actions happening before the beginning of the play. However, Hamlet focuses almost exclusively on Gertrude and her actions (or passive inactions). Although Hamlet's anger at Gertrude is more understandable now that we have considered the laws of the time, it is still surprising that Hamlet seems to have no issue with Claudius, instead focusing his anger almost entirely on his mother. Despite Gertrude's guilt, it would seem that Hamlet's anger is focused too much on his mother.

Part Three: How should Gertrude be read?

Given the understanding of Gertrude based on the historical context as well as the more popular interpretations of her character, I will now argue how I believe that Gertrude should be read. Instead of focusing on Gertrude's sexuality, her marriage with Claudius, and her relationship with her son, I will instead focus on the character of Gertrude herself. It would seem that many critics lose sight of Gertrude in their attempts to analyze this infamous play. Perhaps it is because of her lack of lines or the fact that many believe her characterization comes mainly from the characters around her, particularly the stronger male roles such as Hamlet, Claudius, and the Ghost. However, I would argue that Gertrude is a character in this play of her own being, separate from the men around her. Despite her lack of lines and ability to speak for herself, I would argue that Gertrude is still an independent character who should be treated as such.

As Richard Levin notes in "Gertrude's Elusive Libido," Gertrude is often misunderstood due to the actions and words of other characters. Levin writes, "...while many (male) critics have accepted without question Hamlet's and the Ghost's statements about Gertrude's lustful nature, she herself never gives us any sign of it" (322). Since we have already discussed the shortcomings of the Ghost and Hamlet as narrators, I believe that we should focus on Gertrude herself to determine her character, instead of trying to interpret her actions through the lens of other (biased) characters. As Levin continues, "Unfortunately for her, Gertrude is the victim of a bad press...since she and her libido are constructed for us by the two men who have grievances against her ... while she herself is given no opportunity to testify on her own behalf" (323). Since it is difficult to use Gertrude's words as they are so few, we must also rely on her actions, which are

described throughout the play. Considering that much of the past understandings of Gertrude have been through the eyes and words of whom we now know to be capricious narrators, we must determine Gertrude on her own terms, instead of on the terms of others. Given that Gertrude cannot always speak for herself, we must interpret her character through a different venue. Abigail Montgomery's essay, "Enter QUEEN GERTRUDE Stage Center: Re-Viewing Gertrude As Full Participant and Active Interpreter in Hamlet" focuses on Gertrude as an independent moral character who must be analyzed under her own circumstances instead of relying on an understanding founded by other biased male characters. Montgomery explains that although "Gertrude's death, life and overall importance to the play have been minimized dramatically and critically, perhaps more so than those of any other principal character in *Hamlet*," (99), it is still possible to read Gertrude independently of the men surrounding her. "Gertrude's personal decisions, actions, and opinions, not her 'sexuality and secrets' (Parker 74), are central to a reading of Gertrude's life and death that is not contingent upon any of *Hamlet's* men" (Montgomery 101). Therefore, instead of focusing on what the other characters are saying about Gertrude, I will focus on what Gertrude herself tells us through her actions and the little speech that she is given. It would seem as though this would be a rather obvious way to analyze a character; however, Gertrude has not been analyzed in this way for much of the past criticism. It is because of this that I must make this distinction prior to my arguments. Knowing this, I would argue that I agree fully with Montgomery, who writes that "Gertrude is thoroughly developed, autonomous, morally responsible and accountable self, a true participant in *Hamlet's* tragedy; she is also an accomplished analyst, interpreter, and shaper of the play's dramatic reality" (101). Having this

knowledge, I will now explain how I believe that Gertrude should be read, instead of how she has been read most widely in the past.

A comprehension of Gertrude's character relies heavily on the words of the character herself. Since these words are so few throughout the play and so often overshadowed, it is hard to consider her words as a full representation of Gertrude. However, there is one in particular that is the source of much controversy in that the meaning of the line "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (3.2.254) is so ambiguous. This line has been interpreted in many different ways, depending on the author's interpretation of Gertrude; construing this line as a means to an end. I would explain this line in light my reading of Gertrude's character.

This line references the Player Queen's protestations in Hamlet's play, *The Mousetrap*. Although there are references to Hamlet writing this play, it is unclear how much and which parts are by Hamlet's hand. The melancholic Hamlet intended to use this short play to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.634). The plot of the *mise en abyme* follows a sickly, elderly King whose wife professes her eternal love and devotion, even after the death of her husband: "In second husband let me be accurst./ None wed the second but who killed the first" (3.2.202-203). This Queen claims in multiple instances that she would rather live the life of her hermit than remarry because that would be an insult to her love and her husband.

A second time I kill my husband dead

When second husband kisses me in bed.

...

Nor earth to give me food, nor heaven light

Sport and repose lock from me day and night

...Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife

If, once a widow, ever I be wife. (3.2.207-208, 239-240, 245-246)

These lines may not have been written by Hamlet but they seem similar to his expectations of Gertrude, his own mother, concerning the death of her husband. Although Hamlet claims that the play is intended to trap Claudius, the full extent of lines such as these suggest that the play is more focused on the player queen's (and Gertrude's) crime of remarriage instead of the villain's crime of murder. Considering this contrast, I would argue that these lines were written or extended by Hamlet due to his past focus on his mother's sexuality and choices. Also, considering that Hamlet draws attention to these words specifically, asking Gertrude, "Madam, how like you this play?" (3.2.253) just after the queen leaves her husband, hoping that nothing separates them from each other. Hamlet's focus on Gertrude and her reaction suggests that he wrote at least part of this section, intending to catch Gertrude's conscience, not just Claudius's.

Gertrude's infamous answer could suggest several things, but I would argue that Gertrude's response implies that she may or may not have made similar protestations to King Hamlet before his death, but that she now understands why one cannot always follow through with such promises. In her case, Gertrude may have promised King Hamlet that she loved him and would never remarry. However, she most likely did not expect King Hamlet to be murdered by his own brother. Therefore, under the circumstances, Gertrude did what was necessary to protect herself and Hamlet. The famous line suggests not that the Player Queen is intending to break her oaths as she speaks them, but that one cannot predict what may come. If Gertrude did make similar

protestations to King Hamlet during his life, as I suggest, then it is likely that she feels remorse not for her actions but for her words. Gertrude could not have predicted the coming events which negated her professions and promises, yet it is possible that she feels guilt for her remarriage regardless of her intentions.

This infamous line has been interpreted, construed, represented and understood in many different ways depending on the critic and the intent of the argument. I believe that Gertrude means that the Player Queen should not make promises that she does not know if she can keep, as Gertrude herself may have done with King Hamlet before his murder. Gertrude suggests that the Player Queen not “protest too much” because she, like Gertrude, will feel guilty when the circumstances change and she has to break her past oaths, even though she has good desires for herself and her son.

With an understanding of Gertrude’s infamous line, I will now explain how Gertrude should be seen as an independent and autonomous moral being, capable of making her own conscious choices throughout the play. While it is easy to disregard Gertrude because of her hasty marriage to Claudius and her seeming lack in interest in the recent death of her husband or her son’s obvious struggle, I believe that Gertrude is more than this. She should not be viewed based on her interactions with the male characters around her because their words and opinions taint our view of Gertrude. Instead, we must focus on Gertrude herself. As Janet Adelman explains in *Suffocating Mothers*, “the Gertrude we see is not quite the Gertrude [the men] see. And when we see her in herself, apart from their characterizations of her, we tend to see a woman more muddled than actively wicked; even her famous sensuality is less apparent than her conflicted solicitude both for her new husband and for her son” (15). Because we cannot

rely on the undependable narrators that are the Ghost and Hamlet (or Claudius, for similar reasons as the others), we must rely on Gertrude. When we take away the other characters and their interpretations of Gertrude, we are left with a character who is not nearly the same as the Gertrude who is often portrayed in film or read by many. Gertrude is not the sexual fiend who remarries quickly because she is attracted to Claudius. Since her actions are often left very open for interpretation, I would argue that I believe that when stripped from the opinions of the characters around her, Gertrude changes from a sensuous being into a mother who is trying to protect her son. One scene in particular that emphasizes this interpretation is the infamous closet scene, which has been analyzed and construed in many different ways in the past. I will argue that the closet scene depicts Gertrude as an independent moral being who makes her own choices in regards to her subsequent actions of the play.

The closet scene is a setup for Hamlet. Polonius (seemingly under instruction of Claudius) tells Gertrude to invite Hamlet into her closet and speak to him so that Polonius can determine whether Hamlet is able to be trusted by Claudius. Some critics have argued that Gertrude's trickery of Hamlet belies her loyalty to her husband instead of her son. However, I would argue that Gertrude sets up the situation in such a way that Hamlet understands that he is being tricked and does not betray his true self until after Polonius, the threat, has been eliminated. Lisa Jardine writes about the closet scene, arguing that

...Gertrude embarks on her audience with her son in the full knowledge that they are deliberately overheard. ... by summoning her son to her most private quarters she formally signals to him that their meeting will be in the

strictest confidence. Here, then, are grounds for accusations of betrayal: from the outset Gertrude connives in misleading Hamlet... (150)

While Jardine makes a strong point, I would argue that the nature of Gertrude's invitation itself belies her intention. Gertrude invites Hamlet into her private quarters, a place that would only be visited by Gertrude and, rarely, her husband. The fact that Gertrude invites her son into this space would signal to Hamlet, not that their meeting would be private, but that their meeting could not be private. By inviting her son into her private quarters, Gertrude is signaling to Hamlet that this space is no longer private. The mere presence of Hamlet signifies a lack of privacy. Jardine comments on this later, writing

But the presence of an intruder means that privacy is already absent, his exchanges already coloured by public interpretation as they are uttered. The competing and conflicting signs which Hamlet receives from his mother are the product of an insecure separation of private and public domains, intimate and state space. (153)

In other words, upon hearing the invitation to his mother's private quarters, Hamlet would have understood that he would be overheard because his presence in his mother's private quarters would signal that her quarters had been breached. This is evident when Hamlet hears Polonius respond to Gertrude's cries for help. Polonius responds to Gertrude's cries with "What ho! Help!" (3.4.28). Although Hamlet does not technically know that Polonius is there, he immediately responds with "How now, a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead" (3.4.29). The following stage directions explain that Hamlet "thrust[s] a

rapier through the arras” (3.4). Hamlet does not seem surprised by the fact that someone is hiding behind the curtain. In fact, he almost seems ready for such a “surprise” because he immediately reacts by killing him. However, Hamlet does expect that the rat is Claudius, not Polonius. Hamlet’s lack of surprise in this situation suggests that he understood that his meeting with his mother would not be private. Therefore, I would argue that Jardine is wrong in her argument that Gertrude is deliberately betraying her son by acting as a decoy for Claudius and Polonius’s plot. Instead, I would suggest that Gertrude’s invitation belies her true intent and delivers a secret message which Hamlet receives despite his seeming madness.

Not only does the invitation from Gertrude to Hamlet give us a clue about the intentions of Gertrude, but the rest of this scene also gives us a better idea of her character. As Montgomery writes, the problem that Hamlet has with his mother, which he explains in the closet scene, is that “...Gertrude *chose* Claudius over his father... Gertrude, as much and as individually as any of the play’s central men, grapples with her actions and the resulting status of her soul before God” (103). Hamlet feels betrayed by Gertrude because he thinks that she has forgotten and replaced his father with Claudius. When Hamlet points this out to Gertrude in the closet scene, she seems to feel regret about her actions and sympathy to Hamlet for his feelings. After Hamlet lectures Gertrude against her decision to replace King Hamlet with his brother, Claudius, Gertrude responds, “O Hamlet, 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. 99-102). Gertrude tells Hamlet that she cannot stand his lecturing because she is embarrassed and ashamed of herself and her actions. This exchange shows that Gertrude is a moral being

who knows the difference between right and wrong. She shows Hamlet here that she regrets her “wrong” action of marrying Claudius so soon after King Hamlet’s death and seems to feel guilty over the recent events in Denmark. However, as I will argue later, I believe that there is even more to Gertrude’s act here. Soon after this, Hamlet convinces Gertrude to take part in his revenge plot by lying to Claudius. Hamlet wants Claudius to think that he is mad and therefore unable to plot against Claudius in his estranged and demented state. Gertrude agrees to lie to Claudius, “Be thou assured, if words be made of breath/ And breath of life, I have no life to breathe/ What thou hast said to me” (3.4.219-221), and follows through with her promise. Gertrude’s promise may seem as though it represents a switch in loyalties from her husband to her son, but I would argue that there is more to this choice than a mere switching of loyalties. I believe that Gertrude makes this choice of her own volition and it represents her ability to make choices and fulfill promises, an aspect of a character who is independent and moral. Montgomery writes, “[Gertrude] has promised that she will not tell Claudius that Hamlet’s madness is false, and she twice tells her husband that her son’s madness is genuine. This moment represents more than a relocation of Gertrude’s subservience from her husband to her son” (105) and that “the relevant point here is that Gertrude—an independent moral agent—makes and then keeps an oath” (105). Instead of proving her ability to support her son, this action by Gertrude supports the theory that Gertrude’s actions, on their own, can explain her character better than the analysis of other characters’ interpretations of Gertrude can. Because of scenes such as this one, we can argue that Gertrude is able to make her own decisions, she is able to tell the difference between right and wrong, and that therefore she is an independent moral being, separate from the men around her and

their biased impressions of her. Montgomery goes as far as to argue that “when she chooses to abandon her promise to Claudius and keep her promise to Hamlet, Gertrude continues the project...of restoring the resolve, apart from Claudius or any man, that she ultimately demonstrates in choosing, albeit unwittingly, her tragic death” (105). Gertrude’s choice here, in the closet scene, demonstrates Gertrude’s ability to make her own choices, which leads inevitably to her final choice: her death. Montgomery believes that the choice shown here marks a turn when Gertrude regains her power over herself and her ability to make her own decisions, which later results in her decision to drink the poisoned cup instead of Hamlet.

Apart from the closet scene, Gertrude demonstrates her status as an independent being whenever she is given the opportunity to interpret and explain the action of the play. One of the most important scenes of Gertrude’s role as an interpreter of the action of the play is when Gertrude announces the death of Ophelia to Claudius and Laertes. Although Gertrude was not present at Ophelia’s death, her choice to describe the scene marks her ability to sense and interpret the actions surrounding her. She knows that Laertes needs to be comforted at the death of his sister, especially since it so closely follows the news of the death of his father. Despite many critics’ belief that Ophelia committed suicide, Gertrude does not portray such a death. Gertrude tells Laertes a story of Ophelia that does not seem to match Ophelia’s crazed grief from the previous scene. Instead, Gertrude’s story makes her death seem a simple accident: “Her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,/ Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,/ As one incapable of her own distress/ Or like a creature native and endued/ Unto that element. But long it could not be/ Till that her garments, heavy with their

drink,/ Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay/ To muddy death” (4.7. 200-208). Unlike his reaction at hearing the news of the death of his father, Laertes seems to be calmed by this tale instead of incensed. It is as though he accepts this fate, feeling only grief instead of anger. He replies, “Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,/ And therefore I forbid my tears” (4.7.211-212). Laertes’ reaction seems to confirm that Gertrude made the right choice in her portrayal of Ophelia’s death. Instead of forcing guilt and incredible grief on Laertes by telling the tale of Ophelia’s suicide, Gertrude makes the death seem more of an accident, a cause for tears but not anger or remorse. Gertrude’s ability to interpret and relay the events of the play to both the audience and other characters represents not only her status as an independent being but also her responsibility in the eyes of Shakespeare. As Montgomery explains, “Given both her active and interpretive contributions to several of the play’s key moments, Shakespeare plainly trusts Gertrude with the responsibility of shaping and analyzing the plot—so should we” (106). It would seem that, unlike the vacillating narrators of Hamlet and the Ghost, Shakespeare trusts Gertrude with the ability and responsibility of relaying and interpreting the events of the play to the other characters. This responsibility is an important one as it also signals to the audience that Gertrude is a reliable and trustworthy character. However, it seems that in this case, the audience has not picked up on this clue and instead maintains their belief in Gertrude as merely a guilty, sensuous being. Montgomery goes on to argue that “If Gertrude were not an independent reasoning self, if she were merely a domestically and emotionally focused, unimportant female, she would be necessarily incapable of performing emotional or rhetorical analysis” (107). In other words, if Gertrude were as unreliable a narrator as Hamlet and the Ghost are, then

Shakespeare would not have given Gertrude the responsibility of explaining such an important event as Ophelia's death. Some may argue that Gertrude relays this event because she is the only other major female in Hamlet, but I would argue that that Shakespeare thought more deeply than that about his plays. Shakespeare wanted his audience to trust Gertrude in her brief position of power, just as Shakespeare could trust the female in power in his life, Queen Elizabeth. Montgomery concludes her arguments about Gertrude's role as interpreter by writing, "... much of the play's interpretation appears, to modify Croxford, 'through the agency of the Queen.' ... Gertrude offers commentary about a plot point ... and so performs her role as an interpreter and thus a shaper of dramatic action" (105). Gertrude's ability to perform this role not only represents her status as an independent moral being but also her role as a responsible and reliable narrator, a role which is given to her by Shakespeare and should therefore be recognized by the audience and readers.

While the closet scene is often discussed and analyzed by critics, I would also like to note the final scene as further evidence for Gertrude's independence. At this point, Gertrude has kept her promise to Hamlet and seems to have turned a corner: she now seems to be on the side of her son instead of her husband. Hamlet and Laertes are fighting when it becomes clear that Hamlet is beating Laertes. Claudius seems rather concerned with this, commenting on it rather often. Claudius determines that he must take matters into his own hands, and offers a toast to Hamlet after placing a "pearl" of poison in the cup. It is unclear whether Hamlet suspects Claudius, but he refuses the drink, instead continuing the fight. However, Gertrude, who has not yet commented on the action, takes the cup and says, "Here, Hamlet, take my napkin; rub thy brows./ The Queen carouses to

thy fortune” (5.2.314-315). Again, it is unclear whether Gertrude suspects Claudius of poisoning the cup, yet she insists on drinking even after Claudius has given contrasting instructions. “Gertrude, do not drink,” (5.2.317), he tells her, yet she does not listen. She has made a promise to her son and she insists upon not only keeping it, but keeping him safe as well. Instead of listening to Claudius, Gertrude chooses to drink, apologizing to her husband even as she disobeys him directly: “I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me” (5.2.318). As Montgomery writes, “[Gertrude] responds with an affirmation of her own desire and ability to act, qualities that make her an independent being, and her right to exercise them without censure” (111). This final act of defiance cements Gertrude as an independent being who is capable of making decisions of her own volition, without her husband or any other person.

However, despite the poignancy and importance of this moment for Gertrude, once again she is lost amidst the men surrounding her. After Gertrude has drunk from the cup, Claudius explains, for the audience’s sake, that the cup was poisoned. Gertrude wipes Hamlet’s face and the fight resumes, and Gertrude’s death almost disappears from the actions of the scene. Hamlet notices that his mother is fainting and Claudius attempts to explain it away. However, Gertrude finally seems to find her voice, exclaiming, “No, no, the drink, the drink! O, my dear Hamlet! The drink, the drink! I am poisoned” (5.2.340-341), before she dies. It is almost possible to miss this entirely, given the ensuing action of the play. Gertrude’s death, much like her life, quickly becomes overshadowed by the men surrounding her. Montgomery notes, “Gertrude is literally surrounded (and perhaps drowned out, depending on staging) by men and male death; Laertes comments on the justice of his own death wound before Hamlet has the chance to

ask after his own mother” (111). Although this moment is rather a pivotal one for Gertrude, she is once again silenced by the men and the actions surrounding her. However, she almost seems to expect that she will be ignored and overwhelmed, which is why she clarifies what (and who) has killed her. Gertrude ends her life but continues to play the role of the messenger, explaining to anyone who survives the fight that Claudius has murdered Gertrude, intending to kill Hamlet. Regardless of what happens after Gertrude’s death, she has ensured that the blame has been properly placed in her final moments.

Although Gertrude does not have many lines and is often overshadowed by the men around her, she does play an important role in Hamlet. Not only does Gertrude often narrate and convey information to other characters, but she completes a journey in which she finds her place and becomes an independent moral being, capable of making her own choices, despite the wishes of her husband or other men in her life. Although Gertrude is often the victim of bad press, understood not in terms of her own character but through the words of the male roles in the play, Gertrude is still a force to be reckoned with. Instead of viewing Gertrude as a mere sensuous being who betrays her husband and her son by marrying her dead husband’s brother, Gertrude should be read and understood as an independent character who dies to protect her son.

Conclusion

Although many readers continue to understand Gertrude as a sensual being without a care for her husband's death or her son's grief and madness, I believe that there is more to Gertrude than this contrived interpretation. Instead of continuing to follow the analysis of critics and readers of the past, who tend to overlook Gertrude in lieu of the stronger male roles surrounding her, I believe that it is important to consider Gertrude's actions and words as well. Through this paper, I have analyzed Queen Elizabeth for her symbolic references and presence which sparked Shakespeare's need to understand the powerful female characters of his plays. I have interpreted the expectations and social norms that led to Gertrude's verdict of guilty. Finally, through a close reading of the text, I have demonstrated how Gertrude's words and actions show a different side to this elusive character.

Instead of taking the easy route and accepting the past interpretations of Gertrude, I believe that it is important to view this character in a new light. Gertrude has been the victim of bad press for over 400 years, so she is ready for a new press release.

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