

The Role of Gertrude and Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Feminist Implication

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Abstract

Review Article

Multiple theories have been applied to analyze and approach William Shakespeare's plays. The theory of feminism is one of them. Though Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reflects women and men's roles in the English Renaissance, he is also a playwright who analyzes, criticizes, and adjusts male-female psychological conflicts. The portrayal of Shakespeare's female characters that surround them are deemed anti-feminist because of their roles or how they are alluded to in the play-text. Women in *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Ophelia, are given degraded opinions and roles within the play, which is the source of this misconception. The play is written from a male perspective; therefore, it focuses on the male characters and their experiences rather than considering the perspectives and consequences of women. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* demonstrates male superiority because Shakespeare has fostered the public aware of women's mistreatment, *Hamlet* can be seen as a test of the feminist approach.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Hamlet, Gertrude, Ophelia, Feminism.

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1609) explores retribution, madness, and complex connections. This essay will focus on the play's two female characters, Ophelia and Gertrude. The essay analyzes how Shakespeare portrays women in *Hamlet* through Ophelia and Gertrude. It also examines how modern patriarchal culture influences Ophelia and Gertrude's actions and behavior, as well as male characters' decisions. They are depicted as the subservient and silent gender, controlled by men. Gertrude, on the other hand, is a strong lady who tries in vain to protect the state from Hamlet's emotional decisions and vengeance. Her presence in the play shows how women are viewed in today's patriarchal society. Women today try to regulate their lives, activities, and behavior in many ways. A feminist analysis of the play reveals that an emotional and irrational woman becomes embroiled in rebellious state or discipline operations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shakespeare is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of all time and is described as an author with a "deep understanding of the human heart" (Daiches, 1969, p. 246). His sonnets and plays

frequently focus on male authority and control. Women had little power and property throughout the Elizabethan period. They were denied an education, and domestic conflicts were frequently resolved through violence and gender discrimination (Rackin, 2005, p.7).

Men's anxiety can stem from their dread of powerful women. Investigating his works from this perspective might be difficult because they are created from a masculine perspective and with male terminology. Misogyny is prevalent in literature. Men, according to Donovan, are the foundation of all literature, and women are always deemed as "the other" (Donovan, 1989, pp.4-5).

Women who appear are often "feminine" and play a household function (Rackin, 2005, pp. 49-50). Anyone may see female characters to be less significant at first because there are only two of them. When the play is viewed from a feminist perspective, it depicts misogyny in a patriarchal society. Ophelia and Gertrude, for example, are presented as weak and unimportant. If a different interpretation was employed, such as a lack of male authority, evidence would be discovered to support it. Rackin claims that history and information must be reinterpreted and studied further,

because they are incomplete. "It is only one of many stories about women's role in Shakespeare's society," she says, "and I think we need to think about the ramifications of its current hegemony" (Rackin, 2005, p. 9).

Ophelia, according to Findlay, means 'helper' (Findlay, 2010, p. 311). She appears to be eager to assist Hamlet and his family. She is nothing without them since she is reliant on them. As a result of the deaths of Hamlet, her father, and her brother, she goes insane. The name Gertrude can be interpreted as strength (Findlay, 2010, p. 152). She is a Queen, so she must make judgments that benefit the state and put the needs of the kingdom ahead of her desires. To do so, she must marry Claudius to keep her position as Queen, although he betrayed the King. When Gertrude marries Claudius, Hamlet accuses her of being lusty and weak. A widow is a woman who has lost her husband. The widow should mourn her husband and refrain from considering remarrying. Hamlet is partly enraged with Gertrude because she remarried, and therefore her dead husband's memory diminishes (Findlay, 2010, p. 445). Because Hamlet's actual feelings are for his father, he does not want his father's memory or soul to fade away. From a patriarchal standpoint, she looks to be weak because the play is written and viewed from a patriarchal standpoint (Findlay, 2010, p. 152). When Hamlet tells Gertrude that Claudius murdered the King, she accuses him of being insane. This could also be a symptom of Gertrude's frailty. Rather than raising her voice in protest of Claudius, she blames his craziness on Hamlet. Another interpretation is that she guards Hamlet because he thinks with his emotions rather than his intellectual mind. (Findlay, 2010, p. 153).

A Feminist Implication

Feminist critics look at how women are portrayed in literature as well as the political motivations for gender roles. Barry argues that women are represented in literature and whether they vary from men owing to biology or societal constructs. Furthermore, feminist critics analyse female roles as "the other" characters in literature and perceive them as political with patriarchy (Barry, 2002, p.140). Barry also discusses how feminist criticism has shifted perceptions over time. In the 1970s, for example, the focus was on men and inequality. The attention shifted to the female character in the 1980s, rather than the male role. It also concentrated on recasting the image of women. As a result, women's literature and female authors have benefited (Barry, 2002, p.130). Feminist criticism, according to Bennett and Royle, examines the complexities of gender inequalities. To comprehend patriarchal and hierarchical institutions, the literary text must be examined carefully. (Bennett and Royle, 2016, p. 214) According to Ros Velasco, domestic abuse, injustice, enslavement, and ignorance are among the issues that third-world countries face. Women in the first world are generally well-educated and free to

control their bodies, sexuality, and life choices (Ros Velasco, pp.114-15, 2017).

Women in literature are frequently depicted as emotional and submissive, yet female characters with larger roles are frequently active and resist these stereotypes. Of course, there is a contrast between contemporary literatures, which is cognizant of the fight for women's empowerment. Even though early 17th-century literature did not explicitly depict inequality in contemporary life, it frequently depicts women's plight in patriarchy. Millett claims that there are variances between femininity and masculinity within stereotypes and sex roles. She explains that women are described as being domestic, pious, and docile. Men, on the other hand, are ambitious, assertive, and energetic (Millett, 1970, p. 26).

In the play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare frequently addressed sexuality and associated humiliation, such as women's uncontrollability. He has depicted faithfulness, adultery, and cuckoldry in this play (Rackin, 2005, p.11). According to Szasz and Laing, when women disagreed with men, they were labelled with hysteria. Insanity and mental illness did not exist. It was a misconception that controlling women's unpleasant behaviour would lead to household and cultural subjugation. For example, when women attempted to exert control, this was disturbing behaviour (Neely, 1991, p.317). Hysteria and madness, according to Grosz, are a "rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of womanhood" (Devereux, 2014, p.38).

The Role of Gertrude in *Hamlet*

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gertrude represents women's inferiority and unpleasant patriarchal customs and culture. The dramatist has portrayed characters such as Hamlet's mother and the Danish Queen. Claudius' wife and the Ghost (King Hamlet). Gertrude is portrayed as an incestuous woman seeking love.

The period's canons considered such unions incestuous and thus prohibited. Includes royal and noble weddings. A widow's marriage to Bernard, Count of Armagnac, was forbidden by the Pope in 1392. Emanuel of Portugal married his late wife's sister in 1500. (Archibald, 2001). Only the Ghost and Hamlet mention incest in *Hamlet*. Gunenç (2015) defines Gertrude's actions as defined by Hamlet, Claudius, and the Ghost. Her voice and ideas go unheard.

As Emily Graf states in *Gertrude's Role in Hamlet* (2013), "[...] she (Gertrude) is also guilty of theoretically taking away Hamlet's heirship." This is because if Hamlet remains childless, Claudius and his descendants will inherit the Danish throne (Jardine, 1989). It is possible that inheritance law does not favor Hamlet and that an heir may usurp Hamlet's right to the kingdom.

The Role of Ophelia in *Hamlet*

Western patriarchal culture had devastating effects on women's health. Men were unaware that women were free to express themselves in this way. The feminine body is admired by males. Throughout the Renaissance, males regarded the female body as their property, and dominance over women as a life aim (Ortiz, 2013). A Renaissance audience would have approved of Hamlet's sexual discussion with Ophelia in the Mousetrap scene:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Ophelia: No, my lord.

Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs. (Act III, ii, 1622)

At one point Ophelia was told that she should be in a brothel instead of being a "breeder of sinners" (Act III, i, 1617). Hamlet constantly fosters his feeling of dissatisfaction with the idea of women altogether. Hamlet speaks to Ophelia offensively so she will not become a "breeder of sinners" (Act I, i, 1617) because he believes that the sins committed by a child are because the mother is the true sinner. "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Act I, ii, 1579) Following Hamlet's belief that women are weak, which was indicated in the quotation, and Ophelia's psychological conflicts eventually cause her to lose her mind and go insane, because her death is not represented on stage, the picture of her singing is less perilous than the image of her screaming. Ophelia's portrayal of craziness takes an unexpected form in the form of music. Gertrude's speech just recalls her death and "marks a vital juncture in response to the risks of excess and disorder symbolized in Ophelia's music." (Romanska, 2005, p.485).

According to Romanska, by removing Ophelia's death from the play's conclusion and including Gertrude's haughtiness. Shakespeare has diminished Ophelia's worth as a feminine figure. As a result, Ophelia's irritating song can be interpreted in two ways: either as a female expression of female rebellion against male control or just as an insignificant sexual object (Romanska, 2005, p.490).

CONCLUSION

To comprehend Shakespeare's representation of women, one must examine solely Gertrude and Ophelia, the only female characters in *Hamlet*. As both illogical and sane as they are, Ophelia and Gertrude are weak and strong, reliant and self-sufficient. Hamlet serves as a good example of a general trend. Gertrude now appears to be more of a wife and mother than a tyrannical monarch. There is much debate about her betrayal and decision to marry the King's murderer. Ophelia is portrayed as a typical meek and weak character. Throughout the play, her character is never

shown to be who she claims to be. Her brother forewarns her not to put her faith in Hamlet's emotions as she makes her stage debut alongside him. Second, she is in the company of her father, who has ordered her to stay away from Hamlet. In addition, her role exists only to help Hamlet. It is possible that she was able to make her own decisions when she took her own life. Others in the play attribute her suicide to the loss of her father, Hamlet's death, and her absent brother. It shows that Ophelia needs a reason to live to save the lives of others. When she commits suicide to be with Hamlet, she may appear irrational and irrational, but it is not all that out of character for her. Anyone should act like Ophelia if a lover who murdered his father rejects and shames anyone. While Ophelia and Gertrude may appear to be inconsequential, they have a key part in the decisions of the male characters. Despite Gertrude's efforts, Hamlet and Claudius murder one another, while Ophelia reveals another side of Hamlet. There are still discussions about and issues with Shakespeare's representation of women, which is one of the reasons *Hamlet* remains relevant today.

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