**Women in *Hamlet***

In the play, *Hamlet*, only two members of the cast are female characters. One, Gertrude, is projected as an incestuous, cold-hearted woman. 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. Shakespeare portrays the women in an essentially negative manner. Both women play passive roles in the male-dominated Danish court: “Frailty thy name is woman”.

The first woman introduced in the play is Gertrude, the Queen of Denmark. Although she is of high order, she casts a shadow of lustful and irreversible behaviour. Gertrude is a symbol of weakness in the Danish court; she lives in the shadow of the King. Dependent on King Hamlet, “she would hang on him/as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on.”(Act 1, Scene ii, 143-144) She is similarly dependent on Claudius. Shakespeare had the power to make Gertrude out to be a dignified character, even perhaps a martyr (willing victim) 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). Gertrude is also shallow and changeable. 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. Gertrude simply does not have the gumption to stand up to these men, and she surrenders to their ploy.

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 woman, married hastily to Claudius. “With an auspicious [fortunate] and a dropping eye, with mirth [merriment] in funeral and with dirge [lament] in marriage, in equal scale weighing delight and dole”” (Act I, scene ii. 11-13). What comes as a result of this, and also as a result of the shortness of Gertrude’s grieving is one of the main reasons for Hamlet’s profound disenchantment with life: “O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer.” (Act 1, Scene ii, 150-151) She appears insensitive to Hamlet’s grief: “The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.”

Hamlet’s behaviour contrasts sharply with the behaviour 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 honour, 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 Hamlets feelings and sides with Claudius, who ironically was responsible for the murder of Hamlet’s father. This indifference towards Hamlet’s emotional despair encourages the audience to believe that Gertrude is nothing more than malevolent. Shakespeare does an effective job in painting a picture of Gertrude as a poor mother, lustful courtesan, and possible adulterer.

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. This prevention gives Hamlet a convenient excuse to go mad 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. 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 makes matters in Ophelia’s life more complicated. This reliance on her father’s governance places Ophelia in a vulnerable position.

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

There is a charming innocence about Ophelia’s activities during life and a pathetic beauty about her death. She is, as her father says, “a green girl”, childlike, inexperienced, frightened by Hamlet’s odd behaviour, totally obedient to her father. She is, of course, one of the classic examples of the innocent sufferer in tragedy, the pathetic victim of a process set in motion by forces beyond her control and over those whose course she has no influence. Ophelia’s insanity and death highlights the plays tragic dimension. Through no fault of her own, she is dragged into a world of corruption, violence and deception. She pays the penalty for the crimes of others.

Ophelia is also a symbol of weakness in the Danish court. She is dominated by every man in her life. She is used by her father, abused by Hamlet, exploited by the King and lectured by her brother. Ophelia’s behaviour heightens Hamlets sense of isolation. She is obedient to her father (she allows herself to be ‘bait’ to spy on Hamlet) and agrees when he says not to believe Hamlet’s vows.

Both Ophelia and Gertrude fail to survive in the patriarchal society. They are both dominated by the men in their lives and die as a result of their male power struggles. While Gertrude’s death can be attributed to her own faults and weaknesses, Ophelia’s death is not caused by any personal flaws. 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 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.

When Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet* 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 theses attachments the women would just be peasants. 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. 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.