In a sense, the subject of Hamlet is death.
—Lewis, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?" 306.

Now the theme of Hamlet is death.

QUEEN GERTRUDE Thou know'st 'tis common—all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity.
HAMLET Ay, madam, it is common.
—Hamlet, 1.2.72-74.

If Hamlet truly aims for a "discriminating encounter with the universality of death" (Fly 258) and not only with the single death of its titular prince, we might reasonably suppose that every key death in the play garners thorough dramatic and critical attention and takes its own secure place in the play's overall portrait of death. Further, we might suppose that the on-stage life of each major character whose arc ends in one of the play's major deaths receives equally thorough dramatic and critical attention. It is particularly surprising, then, to realize that one central character's death, that of Queen Gertrude, is quite easy to read over in both the stage/page chaos of Act 5, Scene 2 and the body of scholarship surrounding the play. Gertrude's death, life, and overall importance to the play have also been minimized dramatically and critically, perhaps more so than those of any other principal character in Hamlet.

Readings of Gertrude have tended—apparently—to accept the notion that "however important the part of the Queen in the story of Hamlet, her role in the play is definitely subordinate" (Maxwell 236, emphasis original). Recent (and not so 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. Gertrude has been marginalized as, variously, one of Shakespeare's many women who "die as a result of their love of men" (Neely 22); one of his "remarrying widows [who]
consistently fare ill, [and so] genre as the determinant of their destinies seems less relevant [. . .]” (Kehler 401); or a “site of origin” (Adelman 23, 24) for her son’s experience and thus someone whom “we are not allowed to see [. . .] as a separate person” (Adelman 34). Patricia Parker gestures at the problem with this tradition: “Critics of Hamlet have sensed the centrality of Gertrude and Ophelia to this play even when, as characters, they are marginalized by what appears to be taking center stage [. . .]” (80), and thus David Scott Kastan’s 1995 observation that “[e]ven the remarkable feminist response to the play that has restored Ophelia and Gertrude to critical notice tends to focus largely on Hamlet” (6) remains a valuable signpost toward new ground still to be covered in readings of Hamlet.

I offer here one such reading, a reading that begins at the end by taking Gertrude’s death scene (5.2.233-43) as its own distinct tragic moment, signaling like every other key death in Hamlet the departure of a fully developed, vital character. These few lines between Gertrude’s defiance of Claudius’s order, “Gertrude, do not drink” (5.2.233), and her death, “The drink, the drink—I am poisoned” (5.2.243), reproduce in miniature Hamlet’s trajectory from setting himself against Claudius in Act 1, Scene 5, to his death in Act 5, Scene 2. A tragedy-in-miniature—“usually dated 1600-1601” (de Grazia 44) and thus appearing at a “[f]in-de-siecle [... a century in miniature” (de Grazia 37)—suggests great importance for itself and its enactor. Gertrude’s death, resulting in horrifying fashion from her own choice to take a simple drink of wine, marks her story as not merely a part of Prince Hamlet’s tragedy, as Maxwell argues (236), but as one in a catalog of Hamlet’s tragedies.

Taking Gertrude’s dramatic death as a signal to review (re-view) her dramatic life reveals a character and her storyline that ought to be read as anything but “subordinate” (Maxwell 236). Gertrude may at times appear entirely subservient to Claudius, having married him shortly after her first husband’s death (1.2.138) and never, through the first four acts, overtly contradicting him. There are, however, several moments, almost hidden within the play as her death is almost hidden within Act 5, Scene 2, that show Gertrude developing and changing, preparing to challenge Claudius outright and embark upon a death that stands as the demise of a rich dramatic personhood. These moments allow us to view Gertrude as “the strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion [lust for Claudius], sensible woman that
she is” (Heilbrun 202). In other words, Gertrude is always capable of independent action, and her story in the play is one of gathering the dramatic power to—among other notable achievements discussed below—make her most deliberate, defiant, and final choice.

An even more interesting and convincing argument for her centrality to Hamlet is that Gertrude’s story parallels her son’s. Rutter calls Jean Simmons’s Ophelia in the 1947 Olivier film “Hamlet’s feminine double” (303), but that distinction can just as usefully be applied to Hamlet’s mother. Both Hamlet and Gertrude are bereaved by the death of Old King Hamlet. Both of their lives change with Claudius’s assumption of his brother’s political and marital positions. Both must learn and ultimately act upon the truth about Claudius. Gertrude and Hamlet both come to question and ultimately defy Claudius’s (arguably) usurped authority; both die, poisoned, as a result. Gertrude is, in her own right, dramatis persona, a character who develops herself and helps to shape the play throughout. 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. If Gertrude is an equal participant in the orgy of death that closes the play, is she not also an equal participant in the preceding four-plus acts? Gertrude is a 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.

**GERTRUDE’S PARTICIPATION**

An important point to remember in considering new readings of Gertrude is “that most playgoers who have seen a well-directed and well-acted Hamlet come away convinced that Gertrude is a fully realized character” (Hill 242). The critical habit of minimizing Gertrude’s role creates a disjunction between the roles of scholar and audience member, leading one critic to react thusly to the Gertrude in a 2001 staging of Hamlet: “not merely reactive, her character had a trajectory often missing from the role of Gertrude” (K. Levin 113). We cannot help but miss important facets of Gertrude when we enter the theater, open the script, or conduct research expecting a “reactive” (K. Levin 113) rather than an active Queen of Denmark. It seems logical, then, to craft a reading that closes this gap, presenting scholars and students of Hamlet with both the pleasure and the intellectual project of criti-
cism acknowledging Gertrude’s unique and vital contributions to the play.

A wealth of evidence that Gertrude is far more than a one-dimensional, “reactive” (K. Levin 113) female construct appears during her and Hamlet’s famous confrontation in her bedroom in Act 3, Scene 4. To be sure, Gertrude begins the scene acting largely under the agency of men. She enters with and taking directions from Polonius (3.4.1-10), who is himself acting upon Claudius’s request to determine the truth of Hamlet’s mental state (3.1.175-87). Before the scene ends, however, Gertrude shows herself as anything but “a decoy” (Jardine “What Happens?” 317), a metaphor that conceives her mainly in terms of how men see and use her.

Following his accidental murder of Polonius, Hamlet slides from description of that deed into an extensive tirade against Gertrude and her new marriage with these words: “A bloody deed—almost as bad, good-mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother” (3.4.27-8). Gertrude may indeed be one sort of “site for fantasies” (Adelman 30) here; by Hamlet’s melding of her remarriage and his murder of Polonius, “her supposed sin is made to overshadow his actual sin and somehow justify it” (Stanton 179). Any self-excusing “fantasies” (Adelman 30) that may inform Hamlet’s accusation of Gertrude do not negate another necessary component of that accusation: Hamlet’s understanding of Gertrude as an independent moral self operating under her own agency. In Hamlet’s view, Gertrude has committed “an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite” (3.4.39-41) every bit as much as Claudius “took my father grossly” (3.3.80). For Hamlet, Gertrude is a moral self who must be brought to account for her sins and must work through the same confrontation of guilt as every other member—living and dead—of the Danish royal family.

Gertrude’s response to Hamlet’s accusation further supports this view of her as a distinct, fully accountable moral self: “Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct” (3.4.79-81). By her own words, then, Gertrude is not an auxiliary “contaminating agency” (Adelman 24) bringing death and destruction upon the male characters. The contamination that concerns Gertrude is that of her own soul. In fact, this concern with her soul’s status underlines her status as a central, fully drawn character. Her anxiety for her soul is precisely that shared by
Old King Hamlet (“Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin, / Unhouseled, dis-appointed, unaneled, / No reck’ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head” [1.5.76-79]), Claudius (“My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” [3.3.97-98]), and Hamlet himself (“And for my soul, what can it do to that, / Being a thing immortal as itself?” [1.4.47-48]). Richard Levin’s recent reading of Act 3, Scene 4 also encourages us to read Gertrude as an independently—if imperfectly—acting moral self: “Hamlet’s principal grievance is that Gertrude chose Claudius over his father” (310, emphasis mine). 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. Rather than simply augmenting the principal male characters’ encounters with guilt, sin, damnation, and salvation, Gertrude intensifies Hamlet’s engagement with these issues by adding a principal female’s encounter. She is not merely part of anyone else’s moral reckoning; she is fully engaged in her own.

Act 3, Scene 4 also challenges Adelman’s claim that Gertrude’s sexual unions with both Old King Hamlet and Claudius represent a place where Hamlet’s father and his uncle “keep threatening to collapse into one another” (21). While this maternal sexual doubling may indeed explain many of Hamlet’s feelings and behaviors (Adelman 35), it does not preclude Gertrude’s independence. Hamlet stands in her bedroom accusing her of wrongdoing. It may be true that “misogyny is generally on the rise in the drama of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean years” (Mullaney 144), but it is difficult to simply stop at accepting Hamlet’s rage at his mother as a generic anti-woman device or the result only of anxiety about maternal sexuality (Adelman 35).

Similarly, Showalter’s suggestion that “Hamlet is neurotically attached to his mother” (235) does not go far enough. Hamlet’s behavior in Act 3, Scene 4 in particular is far more angry, dynamic, and controlled than the idea of neurosis connotes. Gertrude is not a mere space where male identities come together (sexually and otherwise); she is a third problematic parent figure for Hamlet. One recent critic places Gertrude in a number of “significant pairs in Hamlet” (Taylor 109), but even more useful models for considering Hamlet’s difficulties with his various parents deal in groups of three. When Hamlet considers his parents, he is not only concerned with his father and Claudius; Gertrude is always part of his schema. When Gertrude says,
“Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended” (3.4.9) and Hamlet answers, “Mother, you have my father much offended” (3.4.10), Hamlet holds all three parents in his mind to create the formulation. Gertrude is worried that Hamlet has displeased Claudius; Hamlet believes his mother’s marriage to Claudius is an affront to Old King Hamlet. Critics have often focused on “the Oedipal drama of Hamlet” (Chedgzoy 259); like the original myth, this son’s story turns on distinct encounters with both mother and father(s). Thus, readings that place Gertrude on the sidelines of an all-male inter-generational clash miss important elements that only Gertrude brings to Hamlet.

With “the Ghost, Shakespeare creates a father-son-mother confrontation at the heart of the play” (Byles 127); this is literally true when the Ghost joins Hamlet and Gertrude onstage in Act 3, Scene 4 (3.4.93-127). If Gertrude serves only as a point of connection between Old Hamlet and Claudius (Adelman 21), then she might just as well not even exist, but in the play she does. The Ghost’s identity does not take over her “maternal space” (Adelman 20) and combine with Claudius’s presence to somehow hide Gertrude in the shadow of her two husbands. When all three members of Hamlet’s immediate family are on stage (3.4.93-127), “Gertrude, amazed by the responses of Hamlet to the sudden appearance of the Ghost (which she herself cannot see), calls her son mad” (Hallett and Hallett 208). Hallett and Hallett draw attention to this passage mainly for what it says about Hamlet’s state of mind. The passage also has much to say about the state of Gertrude’s personhood: if Old King Hamlet and Gertrude can occupy the stage simultaneously, it is not necessary that “her [the mother’s] presence signals his [the father’s] absence” (Adelman 30). If Gertrude were truly Adelman’s “site for fantasies” (30) and zone of “collapse” (21), she would be subsumed by the Ghost rather than questioning his existence, and she would not then be able to follow this scene by deliberately misleading Claudius.

Of course, actively misleading Claudius is what Gertrude does after the bedroom confrontation. Rather than demonstrating one Renaissance female stereotype, “the proverbial inability of women in particular to keep from disclosing what should be hid” (Parker 73), Gertrude takes action in response to Hamlet’s conviction of her moral self. She swears, “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” (3.4.181-3). What Gertrude promises Hamlet here is that she will com-
ply with his request not to “ravel all this matter out, / That I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft” (3.4.170-72).

It is certainly an open question whether Hamlet truly goes mad or not, but the relevant point here is that Gertrude—an independent moral agent—makes and then keeps an oath. Mad as the sea and wind when both contend / Which is the mightier” (4.1.6-7), she answers Claudius’s query “How does Hamlet?” (4.1.5). Later she reiterates, “his very madness, like some ore / Among a mineral of metals base, / Shows itself pure” (4.1.24-6). She 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. Encouragingly, scholars have previously discussed Gertrude’s actions here terms that suggest honor, ethical decision-making, exercise of agency, dramatic personhood: “she promises Hamlet that she will not betray him—and she does not” (Heilbrun 205); “she loves her son, and does not betray him” (Bradley 167). The next step in recognizing Gertrude’s centrality to Hamlet is easy to take here as the parallel between Gertrude’s and Hamlet’s story arcs becomes particularly evident; they work together in this moment as their individual journeys toward defying Claudius converge. When she chooses to abandon her promise to Claudius and keep her promise to Hamlet, Gertrude continues the project—begun with recognition of her “o’er-hasty marriage” (2.2.57) and discussed more fully below—of restoring the resolve, apart from Claudius or any man, that she ultimately demonstrates in choosing, albeit unwittingly, her tragic death.

**Gertrude’s Interpretation**

Leslie Croxford observes that “[interpretation] is a theme that the play itself employs. It does so, moreover, frequently, if not exclusively, through the agency of the Prince” (94). Just as Gertrude is a participant whose story arc parallels her son’s, however, she is also an interpreter of many of Hamlet’s moments both small and large—much of the play’s interpretation appears, to modify Croxford, “through the agency of the Queen.” In addition to keeping an oath in Act 4, Scene 1 (as discussed above), Gertrude offers commentary about a plot point (in this case, Hamlet’s alleged madness) and so performs her role as an interpreter and thus a shaper of dramatic action. Gertrude displays her interpretive powers in a variety of situations, ranging from fairly
straightforward assessments of events around her to more complex, plot-driving projects: shaping Claudius's understanding of Hamlet's mental state and reporting and commentating on Ophelia's death. Gertrude's words repeatedly deliver important information and commentary to the other characters and to the audience. Scholars have long maintained that "Shakespeare wrote primarily for the theatre [. . .] therefore great weight should be attached to the immediate impressions made by his works" (Bradley 159) and continue to assert "the reliability of dramatic speeches—the assumption that the playwright wanted his audience to understand the play that he is writing for them" (R. Levin 314). 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.

In Act 2, Scene 2, Gertrude employs the less demanding range of her interpretive abilities in relatively simple psychological and rhetorical analysis. She identifies the cause of Hamlet's "distemper" (2.2.55), telling Claudius, "I doubt it is no other but the main— / His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" (2.2.56-7). It would be an unforgivable stretch to suggest that, in any large way, her defiance of Claudius begins here, but she is at least capable of recognizing one of the problems of her marriage to Claudius, however tentatively. Heilbrun praises Gertrude's words here as "not a little courageous" (203). Perhaps Gertrude is at this point completely under Claudius's control and thus incapable of perceiving the "stain of incest" (Maxwell 240) attached to her second marriage; perhaps she is such an actively desiring participant in the marriage that she has caused Hamlet's unhappiness (Mullaney 150). Neither of these extremes is the most useful reading of Gertrude's character. If we believe the Ghost's assertion that Claudius, with "wicked wit and gifts, that have the power / So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust / The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen" (1.5.44-46), then Gertrude, as discussed above, has existed as a person with a "will" and she has been "seduce[d]." She has been under Claudius's control, but with the interpretive act of telling him that their marriage was "o'erhasty" (2.2.57) begins to recover. It is here that Gertrude, begins, in a small way, to direct her own actions, not "[i]n V.ii, [. . .] [that] the Queen for the first time [. . .] acts with initiative and speaks for herself" (Maxwell 245).
This first example could perhaps be used to support the more reductive readings of Gertrude’s role: precise explanation of emotional upheaval within the family might seem tailored to “an exclusive focus on the domestic scene, viewing the play as one more family romance [and] Gertrude as mother” (Mullaney 150). Gertrude, however, pushes past the boundaries of such a reading later in the same scene, when her perceptive powers encompass and direct nuanced verbal exchanges as well. Polonius gives this meandering announcement: “Your noble son is mad— / ‘Mad’ call I it, for to define true madness, / What is’t but to be nothing else but mad?” (2.2.93-95). In response, Gertrude moves from the subjunctive, “I doubt,” to the imperative mood, and provides both an artistic criticism of the speech and a “concise and pithy” (Heilbrun 203) royal command for expediency: “More matter with less art” (2.2.96)—“It would be difficult to find a phrase more applicable to Polonius” (Heilbrun 203). 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. Her interpretive voice, were it not one to be respected and heeded, would not be the voice chosen to communicate what is likely also the audience’s and the court’s artistic opinion of Polonius after he takes eleven lines to convey a simple fact.

Gertrude further demonstrates apprehension of larger scale issues than her son’s mood and Polonius’s excessive verbiage when she tries to convince Hamlet to stop wearing mourning clothes for his father (1.2.68). She encourages him, “Do not for ever with thy vailed lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust. / Thou know’st ’tis common—all that lives must die [. . .]” (1.2.70-72). Though Gertrude may be speaking “rather insensitively” (Lee 156), Hamlet concurs, “Ay, madam, it is common” (1.2.74). Shortly thereafter, she and Hamlet continue the conversation through subtle turns regarding word choice. To her question, “If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?” (1.2.74-5), he retorts “Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76). Gertrude here shows herself as neither the cause of Hamlet’s unhappiness (Mullaney 153) nor the locus of his frustration (Adelman 35) but as, unsurprisingly enough, his mother. Gertrude simply parents Hamlet here. She expresses concern for his healing from grief, tells him the difficult truths of life, and becomes an equal partner in his linguistic project “to name what’s wrong with the world, even if only by
“indirection” (Gross 23).

Any “indirection” (Gross 23) on Gertrude’s part gives way to direct reporting of and commentary on tragic controversy in the later scenes of *Hamlet*. Gertrude has one of the play’s major speeches when she brings the news of Ophelia’s death to Claudius and Laertes (4.7.134-54). Ophelia’s “tragedy is subordinated in the play” (Showalter 221). It is particularly telling, then, that one of the ways in which Gertrude expresses her own dramatic personhood is by publishing the younger woman’s tragedy. Shakespeare has Gertrude make Ophelia’s death known to the community and provide the first interpretation of it. Unfortunately, critics who have offered otherwise generous readings of Gertrude resist giving her achievements here their due. Some argue that “[t]he woman who describes Ophelia’s death [. . .] is harrowed within her limits but not marked and changed by her experience” (Ewbank 67). Others suggest that “their [speeches’] diction and cadences clearly reflect the personality and mood of the speaker (this is not true of Gertrude’s report, which is much more like a self-contained poetic set-piece)” (R. Levin 315) or that “Gertrude’s speech [. . .] not being expressive of her [. . .] does not belong to her” (Scolnicov 102). These analyses, though helpful, risk relegating Gertrude’s finest dramatic moment to yet another limiting reading of *Hamlet*’s queen.

Such readings of Gertrude are particularly unfortunate, given that Gertrude herself is an astute *in situ* reader of *Hamlet*’s patterns. Just as she analyzes Polonius’s rhetoric, she comments on *Hamlet*’s genre. Gertrude senses tragedy after Polonius’s death but before Ophelia’s, when she comments, “Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss” (4.5.18) while waiting to meet with the grief-stricken Ophelia. Her report of Ophelia’s death begins with this same commentator’s awareness of connection among events: “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel, / So fast they follow” (4.7.134-35). Here, a mere two scenes after she has begun to look with a bit of a critic’s eye on the structure of *Hamlet*, Gertrude reiterates that observation and then blends it with her contribution to building that structure. In Act 2, Scene 2, Gertrude recognizes the shortcomings of Polonius’s speech; now she is required—and able—to make an appropriately somber and eloquent speech of her own. She knows before any of the men that Ophelia is dead; she tells them that the younger woman

Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and endued  
Unto that element. (4.7.146-51).

Gertrude’s most crucial feat of play shaping here is her insistence that Ophelia did not deliberately jump but “Fell in the weeping brook” (4.7.146). Earlier in the speech, Gertrude frames Ophelia’s death as an unsought accident by setting a morally innocuous scene—“There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds / Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke” (4.7.143-44)—and displacing blame onto inanimate objects: “her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melidious lay / To muddy death” (4.7.151-4).

Having briefly glossed the nature of death in general to Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 2, Gertrude grows by Act 4, Scene 7, into a character whose voice is powerful enough to command Claudius’s and Laertes’s attention throughout an extended speech alerting them to and shaping their view of a specific death. When she publishes Ophelia’s death, Gertrude has moved from recognizing the universality of death to directing the aftermath of a particular death. Scolnicov reminds us that “there are only two women in the play, both intimately connected to the protagonist, and the one is given the task of announcing the other’s death” (110). Gertrude takes on a pivotal active and interpretive role in Hamlet as the female author of a female death.

We eventually learn from the Clowns that Ophelia’s death is a suspected suicide (5.1.1-12), but Gertrude is the first speaker about this controversial death, and Gertrude describes it as an accident. There are feminist critics who “have maintained that we should represent Ophelia as a lawyer represents a client, that we should become her Horatia” (Showalter 221); the play provides Ophelia with someone who is “reporting her and her cause” (Showalter 221) in the person of Gertrude. In her announcement of Ophelia’s death and at the subsequent funeral—or, as Rutter puts it, “wrecked wedding” (310)—Gertrude is advocate as well as publisher for Ophelia. The stage direction tells us Gertrude is “scattering flowers” (5.1.227) when she says,

Sweets to the sweet. Farewell.
I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife.
I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
And not t'have strewed thy grave. (5.1.227-30)
The priest reiterates the fact that “Her death was doubtful, / And but
that great command o'erways the order / She should in ground
unsanctified have lodged” (5.1.209-11). Showalter’s “lawyer” (221)
analogy is particularly apt here. Gertrude’s carefully crafted speech has
presented Ophelia’s death as an accident (4.7.134-54). Further, because
Gertrude as Queen can give a “great command,” Ophelia begins to
receive the funeral rites that Gertrude specifically wants her to have:
“but for royal intervention, the deceased would not have been granted
Christian burial” (Scolnicov 101). With regard to Ophelia’s death, the
dramatic authority of Gertrude’s interpretive words cannot be denied.
Gertrude brings news of Ophelia’s death to court, Gertrude interprets
the suspicious circumstances around the death, and Gertrude makes
certain that her interpretation results in the public, social, religious
action of Ophelia’s Christian funeral. Gertrude’s interpretation shapes
both events and their perception. Her commentary insisting upon
Ophelia’s accidental death causes the Christian funeral to go forward,
and throughout that funeral she seeks to create a suspicion-free com-
munity perception of Ophelia and her death.

**Gertrude’s Consummation**

Having read Gertrude as a fully active and interpretive person of
the play, not a marginal character or a “site for fantasies” (Adelman
30), I return to Gertrude’s own tragedy-in-miniature. Rutter calls
*Hamlet* “a playtext crowded with male bodies” (300), and indeed
Gertrude spends the final moments of her life surrounded by five men
who are principally focused on a rapier duel between two men.
Though we know that Gertrude will die—“It is the poisoned cup; it is
too late” (5.2.235)—it is possible to nearly miss her physical reaction,
even in reading, which perhaps accounts for the critics who have
glossed over her death—and her—or ignored both entirely:

KING CLAUDIUS [*to attendants*] Part them, they are
incensed.

HAMLET [*to LAERTES*] Nay, come again.

*The QUEEN falls down*

OSRIC Look to the Queen there, ho!

HORATIO They bleed on both sides. [*To HAMLET*] How
is’t, my lord?

OSRIC How is’t, Laertes?
LAERTES Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric.
I am justly killed with mine own treachery.
HAMLET How does the Queen?
KING CLAUDIUS She swoons to see them bleed.
QUEEN GERTRUDE No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet,
The drink, the drink—I am poisoned. [She dies] (5.2.245-53)

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.

It is in this atmosphere that Gertrude has finally directly refused one of Claudius’s commands—“Gertrude, do not drink” (5.2.233). She 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—“I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me” (5.2.234). Even in declaring her freedom, she still asks her husband’s permission. This line stands, however, as the pivotal point in Gertrude’s development of her personality and personal agency, fitting perhaps, because it begins the last moment of growth that she will ever have. Gertrude’s death is one of the most difficult to watch in Hamlet because it is not sudden; we have to wait a few moments after she drinks, knowing before she does that she will die.

When Gertrude does die, a mere nineteen lines after finally directly contravening Claudius’s wishes, she uses many of her final words to directly contravene his speech. After Claudius tries to explain her fall with “She swoons to see them bleed” (5.2.251), Gertrude counters “No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet, / The drink, the drink—I am poisoned” (5.2.252-3). All three of Hamlet’s parents are again present here: Gertrude is speaking; she is directly contradicting Claudius, and while she certainly addresses her son she possibly also addresses his father—they are both her “dear Hamlet[s].”

No woman remains to publish Gertrude’s death as she publishes Ophelia’s, so Gertrude must “show” her own death with the same authority she assumes in bringing the news of Ophelia’s drowning; she is finally the interpreter of her own participation—and death—in Hamlet. Her repetition of “the drink” brings our focus to the poisoned libation. Measure for Measure’s Claudio refers to “A thirsty evil; and when we drink, we die” (1.2.110); this description is apt for both
Claudius and the poisoned wine he has prepared. Having used her agency to defy Claudius and take the poisoned drink that is killing her, Gertrude continues to defy her villainous husband with her dying words. In her last moments, Gertrude has overtly set herself against Claudius and concluded her growth into someone who can challenge his will and expose his lies. Gertrude takes a stand against a controlling husband; that stand leads her to recognize and (almost) announce him as the perpetrator of great evil.

Just as surely as it takes her son’s, that evil takes Gertrude’s life; her final words, “I am poisoned” (5.2.253), complete the clear declaration that she has been murdered. The fact that her overt defiance-to-death trajectory is fast enough to have gotten lost onstage and in the criticism does not mean that it should remain lost. Gertrude proves throughout the play that she is neither a “site for fantasies” (Adelman 30) nor “a quasi-allegorical object lesson” (Kehler 399); she is a full dramatic participant and interpreter. She “dies saluting the dying Hamlet with the poison intended for him” (Neely 172-73) not because her death is somehow contingent upon her son’s (Neely 172), and not because she has suddenly become some idealized vision of a mother (Adelman 34). Instead, Gertrude’s conclusion is what it is because she has chosen, like Hamlet, to defy Claudius. She has further chosen to support her son and to drink the wine, and through her last words she continues to both perform and interpret the actions that flow from those choices.

Gertrude’s death scene underscores her status as a full agent and independent participant in the play’s tragedy; it also marks the ultimate (in both senses) success of her interpretive career. From her analysis of Polonius’s language and Hamlet’s emotions to her direction of Ophelia’s funeral and finally to her death, she has arrived at an impressive point: interpretive success regarding a situation in which Hamlet’s interpretation has failed. Hamlet’s oh-so-carefully designed addition to the Players’ performance may or may not “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.582), but it has no immediate public consequences. Gertrude’s direct statement “The drink, the drink—I am poisoned” (5.2.253), together with Claudius’s aside “It is the poisoned cup; it is too late” (5.2.235) and his decision not to stop her from drinking the poison he intends for Hamlet, let the audience know in no uncertain terms that Gertrude has been murdered in spectacularly careless fashion by Claudius. Those who survive at the Danish court, though they
may have long since forgotten *The Mousetrap*, will likely remember the queen’s dying declaration and draw the correct conclusions about the brief reign of King Claudius. Just as she hopes they will control Ophelia’s posterity, Gertrude’s interpretative efforts rather than Hamlet’s produce the definitive word on the manner of her own death and on Claudius’s particular brand of evil.

In her final scene, Gertrude moves from outright defiance of Claudius to death, just as her son does over five acts. This resemblance is not the only notable feature of Gertrude’s death, however. In its very quickness, as well as in Gertrude’s ability to declare her own choice, defy Claudius, and define her death with very few words within a short time, her death serves not as dramatic background for her son’s but as a signal that she may and in fact ought to be read “as an independent character” (Adelman 30). Gertrude’s direct echo of her son’s tragic arc happens in about twenty lines; her parallel tragic journey appears throughout and shapes the play. First we must find Gertrude amidst the men who surround her at her end (bent variously upon one another’s deaths). If we then follow her death scene’s signal to look throughout the whole play for her dramatic personhood, we produce a reading of *Hamlet* that deepens the tragedy by paying specific attention to all that is lost, to whom is lost, in the death of Gertrude.

“Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince” (5.2.302); Horatio intones this farewell encomium immediately after the not always “noble” and not always “sweet” Hamlet dies. Gertrude—every bit as imperfect and every bit as compelling as her son—receives no personal farewell until twenty-two lines (longer even than it takes her to die) after her death, and even then Hamlet puts himself first and is hardly complimentary toward her: “I am dead, Horatio. Wretched Queen, adieu!” (5.2.275). Act 5, Scene 2 may indeed be read for “the play’s own good-night to Hamlet’s compromised youth, his freedom and his life” (Everett 256), but his is not the only “good-night” in the scene. When Hamlet says, “The rest is silence” (5.2.300) just before his own death, he could just as easily be talking about the situation following Gertrude’s death: the lack of any immediate verbal response to it; the absence of any female speaker to be “Horatia” (Showalter 221) for Gertrude as she is for Ophelia; even the critical tradition that has hesitated to give the queen her due. Gertrude, like her son, survives long enough to take part in *Hamlet’s* finale, along the way powerfully partic-
ipating in both creation and explication of the final fall of the house of Hamlet. Gertrude, like her son, provides action and critical reaction that are vital for a full appreciation of Hamlet.

Often, and rather ironically given her roles as reporter of and commentator on events, “Gertrude is the victim of a bad press, not only on the stage and screen and in the critical arena, but also within Shakespeare’s text” (R. Levin 323). While stage and screen lie beyond the scope of this essay, the same “critical arena” has begun to allow Gertrude a “good press.” Shakespeare’s text has always provided her with evidence for—and in fact allowed her to give herself—the same. Gertrude should be re-evaluated, re-viewed, and re-centered not at the expense of other characters but in order that we recognize all the complexity resident in her place among them. Any “responsibilities of feminist criticism,” indeed any responsible Hamlet criticism, should include reading Gertrude out of schemas that make her contingent upon men or an afterthought to Ophelia. We ought to read Gertrude as a full member of the dramatis personae—a full participant in the action, a powerful interpreter, an essential party to tragedy—in Hamlet. We ought to offer her the same respect that Shakespeare does when he makes her a vital shaper and analyst of the play’s action. The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark certainly can bear and indeed profit from the understanding that it is just as thoroughly the tragedy of the queen.

NOTES
3 For that matter, Carolyn Heilbrun’s opening statement, “The character of Hamlet’s mother has not received the specific critical attention it deserves. Moreover, the traditional account of her personality as rendered by the critics will not stand up under close scrutiny of Shakespeare’s play” (201), holds just as true today as in 1957.
4 Hill offers a different, intriguing explanation for the apparent marginalization of women in Shakespeare’s tragedies. He suggests, “it may also be that he was writing
with the capacities and limitations of his boy actors [. . .] firmly in mind, and that his techniques for the creation of mature women are a direct response to the working conditions of his theater’ (236). Historical staging issues are beyond the scope of this essay, but Hill’s point offers yet another reason to be impressed by just how strongly Gertrude shapes Hamlet.

5 Also see Mullaney 150 for a brief discussion of this tradition.

6 Lee opens up this moment, arguing that Gertrude sparks in Hamlet a larger discussion of “his identity” (156); Berry sees the moment in a more limited way, insisting on the sexual resonances of Hamlet and Gertrude’s words (62).

7 I am also indebted to Kate McGraw for discussions of female authorship, particularly as it relates to female death, in both Othello and Hamlet.

8 Rutter also points out that “In Shakespeare’s playtext, Ophelia never does get buried” (311). While this is true, it does not diminish the power of Gertrude as a speaker and a queen to shape interpretation of Ophelia’s death.

9 Rutter’s article focuses on three film representations of Ophelia’s funeral, and her full formulation focuses on Hamlet as “a playtext crowded with male bodies presented in all stages of post-mortem recuperation [. . .]” (300), the first part of the phrase is just as apt when the men are alive.

10 For detailed discussion of specifically feminine meanings and uses of “show” in Hamlet, see Parker 73-86.

11 Kehler’s article refers specifically to the First Quarto’s Gertrude, but this phrase is also applicable to her discussion of Gertrude in the First Folio.

12 Here I follow another helpful formulation from Rutter, who calls Hamlet “a playtext whose core issue exhaustively and excessively examines the imperatives of male reaction to the death of men” (300).


WORKS CITED


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