**Title:Enter Queen Gertrude stage center: re-viewing Gertrude as full participant and active interpreter in Hamlet**

**Author(s):**[Abigail L. Montgomery](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName(0)=AU&prodId=LitRG&userGroupName=tel_k_smyrna&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue(0)=%22Abigail+L.+Montgomery%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm)

**Source:**[***South Atlantic Review***](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/aboutJournal.do?pubDate=120090622&rcDocId=GALE%7CA301283615&actionString=DO_DISPLAY_ABOUT_PAGE&inPS=true&prodId=LitRG&userGroupName=tel_k_smyrna&resultClickType=AboutThisPublication&contentModuleId=LitRC&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=GALE%7C0135)***.*** 74.3 (Summer 2009): p99. From *Literature Resource Center*.

**Document Type:**Essay

**Bookmark:**[Bookmark this Document](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/generateInfomark.do?docType=GALE&inPS=true&prodId=LitRG&userGroupName=tel_k_smyrna&tabID=T001&pageNumber=&searchId=R14&docId=GALE%7CA301283615&currentPosition=3&type=r&contentSet=GALE%7CA301283615&pageIndex=)

**Copyright:**COPYRIGHT 2009 South Atlantic Modern Language Association

<http://www.samla.gsu.edu/sar/sar.html>

Full Text:

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. (2) 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. (3)

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 Hamlets 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). (4) 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 criticism acknowledging Gertrude's unique and vital contributions to the play.

(portion omitted)

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.

(portion omitted)

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).

GERTRUDE'S INTERPRETATION

(portion omitted)

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 melodious 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. (7)

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 (8) 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 community 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), (9) 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.

 (portion omitted)

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.

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 (12)). 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.

**Gale Document Number:**GALE|A301283615