

GERTRUDE IN *HAMLET*

In *Hamlet*, Gertrude is a woman who means no harm but whose poor judgment contributes greatly to the terrible events that occur. There are only two female characters in the play, and neither one--Gertrude or Ophelia--is assertive. But the decisions Gertrude does make eventually lead to her death and the downfall of others as well.

We first realize in Act I, Scene 2 that poor judgment is her major character flaw. As the mother of a grieving son, Gertrude should have been more sensitive to Hamlet's feelings. Instead, less than two months after King Hamlet's death, Gertrude remarries Claudius, her dead husband's own brother. Gertrude should have realized how humiliated Hamlet would feel as a result, because at that time it was considered incestuous for a widow to marry her husband's brother. There is also jealousy on the part of a son, who feels that his mother should be giving him more attention during the mourning period. Gertrude is not in touch with her own son's feelings to see why he is angry. Hamlet expresses this outrage during his first soliloquy:

O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (I.ii 156-157)

Gertrude is shown to be a loving mother but a parent who cannot read into her son's behavior. When answering Hamlet, she says that it is common for all men to die, but this is not just any man who has died, she should realize; it's Hamlet's own father! Also, when Gertrude asks Hamlet:

If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee? (I.ii 74-75)

she means to calm him down, but the word "seems" only makes Hamlet more suspicious. She fails to realize that in his sensitive

mood, the word "seems" will give Hamlet the impression that she is hiding something. At this point, Gertrude has the opportunity to ask Hamlet what he is implying and face the issue, but she is the type of woman who just wants everything to be smoothed over without thinking too deeply. Someone might wonder whether Gertrude really is concealing some knowledge about a murder, but in Act II, scene 2, there is evidence that Gertrude really hasn't taken part in the plot. Hamlet suspects her of being an accomplice with Claudius in his father's murder. It's too bad, therefore, that Hamlet doesn't hear Gertrude's private conversation with Claudius in which she gives her theory about Hamlet's anger:

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I doubt it is no other but the main,

His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage.(II.ii 56-57)

Gertrude's conscience may finally be bothering her, but only about her quick marriage, not about anything worse. If Hamlet hadn't scolded her, the thought might never have occurred to her that the marriage took place too soon. Her comments show that Gertrude probably was not an accomplice. Up until now, we might have believed Hamlet. However, Claudius and Gertrude are talking privately and still Gertrude makes no reference to any plot. Her sincere reason for hoping that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can

provide clues to Hamlet's behavior is so that she can help Hamlet feel better (a strong contrast to Claudius' sinister motives). In other words, Gertrude's worst fault seems to be insensitivity towards her son. She shows no awareness of how her husband died and therefore no insight into what Hamlet suspects. The irony here is that Gertrude's motivation in watching Hamlet's behavior is genuine concern for his well-being, while Claudius' concern is with his own well-being.

Another example of Gertrude's lack of awareness is inability to realize that her second marriage can be seen as adultery by those around her. Her attitude is that if she and Claudius had simply waited longer before marrying to give Hamlet more time to grieve Hamlet might have reacted better. She doesn't face Hamlet's concept that perhaps the marriage shouldn't have happened at all. Love is the answer to all problems for Gertrude.

She shows this simple-minded thinking also in Act III, scene 1. She tells Ophelia about her hope that Hamlet's madness came from his love for Ophelia. If Gertrude keeps believing this, she won't have to face the marriage as the problem or feel guilty. Gertrude's romantic outlook again keeps her from seeing truth.

Because of Hamlet's powerful belief in his mother's guilt, he takes his anger out on Ophelia, who Hamlet may think is just another insincere woman like his mother. Hamlet is determined to use the play to get at his mother's conscience in addition to Claudius'. But Gertrude reacts casually after watching. Gertrude does not show guilt about her relationship with Claudius but instead, she has a very practical-approach to the Player Queen: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii 236). Gertrude is realistic enough to say that in real life, a widow would easily want to remarry, and that this is why the Player Queen is not a believable character. However, this is

another example of how Gertrude can't or refuses to see how other people are affected by her. Even after Hamlet's questioning, Gertrude is not aware enough of her actions to make a connection between the play and her own life: "...true to her nature, she makes no application of the Player Queen's situation to herself. She does not take personally representations of sin and weakness"(Cohen, p. 86). Gertrude's reaction to the play shows also that she is unaware of Claudius's guilt. Even though Gertrude is described as being upset after Claudius leaves excitedly, she is anxious more about how Claudius feels than about anyone's guilt. If she had questioned Hamlet about why he put on the play, she would have faced the truth, but she makes the decision to worry about Claudius more than about the situation.

Finally, in Act III, scene 4, Hamlet forces Gertrude to see what he is accusing her of: murder, incest, adultery. He does reach her conscience, because she says:

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul, And there I see such black and grained spots As will not leave their tinct. (III.iv.90-92)

She could be admitting a mistake in a too-early marriage to Claudius but not necessarily anything worse. Hamlet really wants to put Gertrude on a moral path when he tells her: "go not to my uncle's bed./Assume a virtue, if you have it not" (III. iv.160-161). But when Gertrude says: "What shall I do?" (III. iv 182) she is not really going to change her behavior even though she could decide to listen to Hamlet or be more cautious in trusting Claudius. Her question just reflects her conflict between son and husband and her wish to please both

of them at the same time - impossible at this point. If Gertrude had shown more sympathy for Hamlet, some of his anger might have died down.

At the same time, Gertrude should not be considered an unsympathetic mother. She does try to protect Hamlet from Claudius in Act IV, scene 1. When describing to Claudius Hamlet's killing of Polonius, Gertrude covers up Hamlet's indifferent attitude by saying that he cried afterwards. She knows that Hamlet did not show sorrow but as a mother, she wants to describe him in a way that will make things easier for him. Gertrude's comment could indicate that she finally realizes Claudius may not be what he seems. But if this is true, why couldn't she have seen this on her own, even before Hamlet's accusations. Again, the answer is that Gertrude does not have the insight to distinguish between sincerity and deception in people. Gertrude still can't see the truth about Claudius. He will send Hamlet away because of fear for his own life, but he tells Gertrude that he is concerned about her safety. If Gertrude's judgment was better, she would object to the idea out of fear for Hamlet's life. Throughout the play, she seems to be more concerned with being caught in the middle of the two men in her life than with the possibility she has done something immoral. Her aim in life is to keep everyone - including herself - happy, even though her actions caused many of the problems in the first place. She refuses to sacrifice her own happiness for Hamlet. Her reaction at Ophelia's funeral shows again that Gertrude is a romantic thinker more than a realist. She is superficial, not showing any great grief but more regret that Hamlet and Ophelia did not get married. Gertrude still wants to believe that their love would have made everything better. This is another case of Gertrude not facing reality and escaping into romantic fantasy. Her reaction in this case is a reminder of her reaction in the play scene in Act III. At that time, during Hamlet's

sarcastic conversation with Ophelia, Gertrude wants to think that he has come back to Ophelia. "The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humored sensual fashion" (Bradley, p. 141).

It is only at the very end, when Gertrude realizes that the cup contains poison, that she faces the truth. Before this moment, the irony in this scene is that Gertrude actually offers the wine to her son to help and encourage him! But she finally has to admit to herself that Claudius is guilty of murdering old Hamlet and of trying to murder Hamlet. When she warns Hamlet not to drink the wine, she again is showing compassion for her son and her wish to protect him from danger.

In other words, the play's last scene summarizes Gertrude's two sides. As a mother, she means well and does have concern for her son but her bad decisions and failure to judge people correctly are a major cause of the tragedy. If Gertrude had been a different kind of person, many of the deaths might not have happened.

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