Gertrude as a Character of Intersection in *Hamlet*

Immy Wallenfels
Syracuse University

Dympna Callaghan in her introduction to *Shakespeare Without Women* notes that in *Hamlet*,

> Hamlet positions his mother as the origin and cause of a complex chain of absence and substitution with which he is incestuously obsessed. Claudius is his absent father's substitute not only on the throne but also in his mother's bed. These circumstances fuel Hamlet's misogyny and articulate a crucial alignment between representation and femininity in which the woman's own body, the female orifice—what Hamlet terms the woman's "nothing" (as opposed to the phallic "thing")—contains the site of her absence.[1]

Callaghan notices Hamlet's May games hobby-horse ("For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot" [3.2.123])[2] as a signifier "of wanton femininity, the genital woman, woman as the site of her own absence."[3] She describes this apparatus of a man riding a wooden horse, suppressed by the Puritans, as a prosthetic phallus. She concludes, "The hobby-horse, then, reveals representation, at least in the context of seventeenth-century popular culture and religious discourse, as inherently phallic and dependent upon a construction of the feminine absence."[4]

In an apparent response to this chain of absence, Hamlet attempts to impose, through language and role-playing, a stereotypic wanton sexuality on Ophelia and Gertrude, the conventions of female characters found in two popular Elizabethan, male-produced genres, the lover's complaint and the female criminal confession. Both genres deplore women's waywardness, foolishness, lust, or murderousness. Both often end in the woman's deserved death.

Hamlet's self-dedication to the conventions of Senecan revenge tragedy leads him to attempt to provoke in Gertrude and Ophelia

the aspect of the feminine that Ted Hughes, in his groundbreaking study *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, terms the "sexually insatiable, whorish, devouring, destructive" consort-killing or "horse" aspect of the feminine,[5] exemplified in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* by Tamora, the Queen of the Goths. However, in her only monologue, her narrative of Ophelia's death (4.7.137-154), Gertrude asserts a broader culturally complex ambiguity Hamlet attempts to suppress as he narrowly pursues a revenge model. In it, she uses visual, tactile and aesthetic details reminiscent of the agricultural rites of symbolic sacrifice and rebirth to preclude by verbal fiat the reductive explanation of Ophelia's death as the typical self-slaughter of the "ruined" maid. For the Elizabethan audience, Gertrude might have represented an intersection between "new" cultural rhetoric and suppressed folkloric traditions.

The ruined maid was a cliché of the lover's complaint genre, the agitated maid (in Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint* with loosened hair and "pale and pined cheek" [5, 30-33]). Hamlet frightens Ophelia with a dumb show of distraction—a piteous sigh and fixed gaze.

> *Ophelia*: As I was sewing in my chamber,
> Lord Hamlet, . . .
> . . . .
> . . . with a look so piteous in purport
> As if he had been loosed out of hell
> To speak of horrors, he comes before me.
> *Polonius*: Mad for thy love?
> *Ophelia*: My lord, I do not know,
> But truly I do fear it. (2.1.78-88)

Polonius conventionally reads Ophelia's narration as "the very ecstasy of love" in Hamlet (2.1.103).

Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint* begins with the destruction of love tokens.

> A thousand favors from a maund she drew,
> Of amber, crystal, and of beaded jet,
> Which, one by one, she in a river threw,
> Upon whose weeping margent she was set. (36-39)

Similarly, Ophelia returns Hamlet's love tokens under the gaze of her father and Claudius as hidden spectators.

> *Ophelia*: My lord, I have remembrances of yours
> That I have longed long to redeliver.
> I pray you now receive them.
> *Hamlet*: No, no, I never gave you aught. (3.1.95-98)

Hamlet gives Ophelia the cues of a dejected lover, but when Ophelia responds in the same conventional vein, he rejects her with misogynistic cruelty, not "into the safe keeping of a nunnery" as Hughes has it,[6] but to the perdition of a "nunnery," slang for brothel.[7]

> *Hamlet*: I did love you once.
> *Ophelia*: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
> *Hamlet*: You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.
> *Ophelia*: I was the more deceived.
> *Hamlet*: Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? (3.1.116-22)

Nevertheless, Ophelia's ribald exchanges with Hamlet at the playing of *The Mousetrap* (3.2.101-109, 130-32, 225-30) do not demonstrate the languishing state of the spurned maiden. Instead, she has the same appearance of liberality, of sexual openness, we see in Perdita as the May Queen in *A Winter's Tale* (4.4.70-134). Not until she is distracted by the killing of her father, a shock emphasized in a recent production of *Hamlet* by having her find the body,[8] does she sing the clichéd song,

> Quoth she 'Before you tumbled me
> You promised me to wed.'
> So would I 'a done, by yonder sun,
> An thou hadst not come to my bed. (4.5.61-64)

Hamlet's conventional allusion to female perfidy in his bawdy exchange with Ophelia anticipates his exchange with Gertrude with in the closet scene:

> *Hamlet*: I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying.
> *Ophelia*: You are keen, my lord, you are keen.
> *Hamlet*: It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge.
> *Ophelia*: Still better, and worse.
> *Hamlet*: So you mis-take your husbands. (3.2.225-30)

His "keenness" is linked to the excitement of demonstrating royal guilt through the drama. He fishes for the Queen's reaction to *The Mousetrap:*

> *Hamlet*: [To Gertrude] Madam, how like you this play?
> *Queen Gertrude*: The lady protests too much, methinks. (3.2.209-10)

Gertrude's response might be a cool critique of the stilted piece. Ophelia's announcement of the King's reaction to the play's murder brings all badinage to an end.

Ophelia: The King rises.
Hamlet: What, frighted with false fire? (3.2.243-44).

The male lover's deceptions are termed "false fire" in Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint* (324), but here the false fire is the miming of murderous lust for another man's estate.

Ophelia's conflicted position between her kinsmen and Hamlet, her compliance with spying, her return of love tokens to Hamlet, even her iteration of "my lord" conspire to appear to reduce Ophelia in the course of the play from the court lady Gertrude hoped "shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (5.1.228) to a seduced complaint-genre victim abandoned by her social better. However, her father's murder by Hamlet, her madness and death, and Gertrude's elegy about her reclaim Ophelia's "special pathos"[9] and rescue her from the insipid genre Hamlet mirrored for her in her chamber. Gertrude reconfigures the "dew-bedabbled wretch" (as Hughes calls Venus's prophetic image of herself)[10] through mythic narrative with cyclical overtones. Without disavowing the lover's complaint theme insisted upon by Hamlet, Gertrude evokes both Renaissance neo-paganism and the popular festivals of rural Britain. Gertrude's laminated and generous monologue is at odds with the severity and rigor Hamlet unleashes at times upon both women.

Hughes intelligently finds a similar severity and rigor in the religious struggles during Shakespeare's time—"civil war by other means"—to connect with his mythic Adonis-Venus struggle: "Two savage competitors for the English soul, which were the new Puritan spirit and the old Catholic spirit, each intending to exterminate the other, both uncertain of the outcome, were deadlocked, and in a sense spellbound, by [Elizabeth's] deliberate policy throughout her very long reign."[11] The Puritans denounced the Maypole, a type of phallic symbol like the hobby-horse. Hughes sees the Adonis legend as a Classical prototype of this strenuous religious temperament: "In the abhorrence of what he imagines to be the Goddess's whorishness, or at least her treachery in love . . . is a 'madness' of the Puritan fear of female sexuality—where female sexuality has become identified with the infernal."[12]

Hamlet's closet examination of his mother's conscience—"you go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (3.4.19-20)—is interrupted by his Senecan gutting of Polonius. Even so, Hamlet in the confrontation with his mother elicits a confession Katharine Craik connects to a "women's" genre of admission of murderous guilt: "a new subset of complaint, seemingly written or uttered by female criminals on the verge of death, [that] emerged from . . . 'gallows confessions.'"[13] As Craik says,

> Complaint is often discussed as a paradigmatically "female" genre, perhaps by virtue of its guilty and repentant voice, but it is striking how few women actually authored complaints and, moreover, how forcefully women sometimes resisted confessing. Reported confessions nevertheless proved culturally important in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, since they were understood to renegotiate patterns of female behavior which imperiled fidelity and intimacy.[14]

Hamlet compares portraits of her two husbands and accuses Gertrude of leaving a "fair mountain" to "batten on this moor" (3.4.65-66), Claudius. Improbably, Hamlet accuses Gertrude of "compulsive ardour" (3.4.76), although he claims she cannot possibly call it "love, for at your age / The heyday of the blood is tame" (3.4.67-68). Despite the confusion in the accusations, especially of putative love with "Rebellious hell, / . . . mutin[ying] in a matron's bones" (3.4.72-73), Gertrude still sees her "inmost part" in Hamlet's glass:

> O Hamlet, speak no more!
> Thou turns't mine eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct. (3.4.78-81)

Diverse commentators, such as Noel Blincoe and Dorothea Kehler, are prepared to quibble about the theological implications of Gertrude's second marriage; but in fact Hamlet has accused his mother of *descent* from one man to another. The deadly words, "As kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.28), have a jingly echo of *The Mousetrap* dialogue. Gertrude now appears to be submerged in male-created sexual representation framed by an excess of Hamlet's sexual revulsion. Hamlet hopes further to sunder Gertrude from her husband's body:

> Good night—but go not to my uncle's bed.
> Assume a virtue if you have it not.
> . . . .
> Refrain tonight,
> And that shall lend a kind of easiness
> To the next abstinence. (3.4.150-54)

Hamlet's sexual jab parallels his dismissal of Ophelia to the stews; it denigrates Gertrude by attempting to reduce her to a fleshy figure of vice.

> Female sexual culpability—as it was understood in both law and imaginative literature—became intractably linked at this particular moment in the history of reading and writing

> with a phobically imagined female vocality. Placed by men into the mouths of culpable women, complaint emerges as the expression of an aspiration to control threatening or disruptive behavior and contributes to the well-documented early modern literary phenomenon of allowing female speech primarily as a means of silencing it.[15]

At first, Gertrude responds to Hamlet in a tone of offense: "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" (3.4.38-9). According to the female confession genre, with its presumption of female guilt, such protests proved the impenitence of the accused, and if the woman persisted, were monstrous. Instead, Gertrude does not protest too much; she shows a tender remorse in reply to Hamlet's apotheosis of his father. Although she names no specific sin, her penitence looks—especially to an Elizabethan audience—like a female criminal confession. But the female confession was followed by the silence of execution. Instead, Gertrude's speech becomes reticent but potent. After the closet scene, she quickly allays Claudius's fear and anger by her narrative of Polonius's demise, stressing its "accidental" nature. For Hamlet's brusque, "For this same lord, / I do repent" (3.4.156-7) she substitutes tears, although Hamlet departed with the cruel gibe, "I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room" (3.4186).

> *King Claudius*: ... Where is he gone?
> *Queen Gertrude*: To draw apart the body he hath killed,
> O'er whom—his very madness, like some ore
> Among a mineral of metals base,
> Shows itself pure—a weeps for what is done
> (4.1.22-26).

This is not exactly untrue, but it is skillfully weighed in Hamlet's favor. Like her eulogy of Ophelia, it is intended to protect her son from Laertes and from Claudius. It is clear from her verbal interventions that she is not preoccupied with her own guilt, but rather that she perceives her son's peril and acts to assuage it.

She also constructs meaning for Ophelia's death. When we look at Gertrude's eulogy of Ophelia, we find the ritual of the May Queen ceremonies asserted against the didactic and simplistic materialism of death represented by the "absolute" clown (5.1.126).

> In the willow speech . . . the Queen suggests that Ophelia's drowning was an accident connected with her irrational, mad behavior. . . . But the graveyard scene that follows close behind seems to establish that the drowning was the result of suicide and that but for royal intervention, the deceased

> would not have been granted Christian burial. . . . The willow speech is so breathtaking that it tends to lull to sleep our critical awareness. But when we listen carefully to the Queen's report and then to what the gravediggers say in the graveyard, the contradiction between the two accounts must strike us.[16]

Gertrude's narration of Ophelia's death not only refutes the charge of suicide ("an envious sliver") it also arrests the "linear development of the plot" between Claudius and Laertes to murder Hamlet.[17] The account binds "together the older and younger women, the only two women in the play":[18] "The gendered space created in Gertrude's speech is a sad landscape of willow and brook traditionally reserved for deserted young women into which Gertrude, as a woman, can enter imaginatively. Dominated by her father and brother, frustrated by her lover, and abandoned by all three, Ophelia has escaped into madness, then into death."[19]

For the well-educated playgoer, Gertrude's monologue metamorphoses "a simple-minded nymph (*nympha campi felicis*)" into a sumptuous and erotically charged water goddess—Ovid's nymph Chloris transformed into the goddess Flora. Elizabethans unfamiliar with the then-popular poet Ovid would have immediately recognized Gertrude's allusions to the popular festival of the May Queen, the fete of the prettiest girl in the village: "The May Queen was crowned and held one day's sway over her court, consisting of morris-dancers, of Robin Hood and his band, and generally of the villagers or townspeople. A pasteboard hobby-horse ridden by a man was sent around among the spectators to collect contributions in a ladle stuck in its mouth."[20]

Gertrude verbally decks Ophelia with the May Queen's garlands associated, as the Greenblatt *Norton* note says,[21] with fertility:

> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,

But she also appears to reinstate Ophelia's chastity—

> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.

A hint of assassination broods in the "envious sliver":

> There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
> When down the weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook (5.1.139-46)

However, for the Elizabethan audience, Ophelia's drowning death is an image of the May-doll. Even in 1890, James Frazer still knew

of these festivals in Great Britain. In *The Golden Bough* he says of the May-doll, "Both male and female vegetation effigies could be thrown in the water. The death of the vegetable spirit was supposed to renew vegetation and bring Spring."[22]

Ophelia's floating clothes evoke the May-doll made of wood or straw:

> 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. But long it could not be
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death. (4.7.146-54)

William Walsh remarks on the overlaying of the pagan festival by later Roman Catholicism:

> The May-dolls which, once common throughout England, are still [in 1897] paraded on May-Day in Devonshire, and may even be found in Cornwall and other parts of Wales. The May-doll is remotely a survival from the images of Flora which graced the Floralia, but more immediately from the figures of the Virgin and her Son of Catholic times.[23]

When Hamlet mentions the hobby-horse just before the players' dumb show, he swears by the Virgin, underlining the association these rituals had with popular Catholic ceremonies:

> O heavens, die two months ago and not forgotten yet! Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year. But, by'r Lady, a must build churches then, or else shall a suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is 'For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot' (3.2.118-22).

As would be appropriate to the notion of "wanton femininity," the hobby-horse elsewhere in Shakespeare is a whore. In *The Winter's Tale,* Leonetes says invidiously,

> My wife's a hobby horse, deserves a name
> As rank as any flax-wench that puts to
> Before her troth-plight (1.2.278-80).

The "wanton femininity, the genital woman, woman as the site of her own absence" in *Hamlet* as Callaghan has it,[24] can be taken to refer not just to Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, but to the full meaning of these old rituals, with their overt sexuality.

The May-doll was a human representation of the Roman (and Greek) *phallos.*

> The human representative of the tree-spirit [May tree/May pole] is sometimes a doll or puppet, sometimes a living person; but whether a puppet or a person, it is placed beside a tree or bough; so that together the person or puppet, and the tree or bough, form a sort of bilingual inscription, the one being, so to speak, a translation of the other.[25]

We can see in Gertrude's speech, then, the additional resonance for the Elizabethan audience of old customs called into disrepute. We may conclude, as Hughes suggests, that Hamlet, perforce, summons the nature of the feminine potently associated with death and rebirth. Despite Hamlet's intentness on Senecan conventions of revenge and his typifying of the two women through then-"modern" literary genres that tended to suppress and stereotype the female, he seems to formulate Gertrude as a primary agent of the decline from King Hamlet to Claudius. Hamlet presumes Gertrude to be the power behind the withering of the kingdom.

Gertrude in her monologue on Ophelia's death does in fact infuse Ophelia with the high seriousness of pagan and Christian sacrifice. Gertrude's construction of Ophelia's death also tells us how she might construct her own death if that were possible. Since she once before attempted to save her son through her narration of the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, it is logical to direct an actress who plays Gertrude as if she intends to drink the cup of poison meant for Hamlet (5.2.232-35). In an echo of the Vessel-Cup,[26] the old Wassail cup, a "pledge drunk between friends" of "be whole" or "be well,"[27] Gertrude quaffs her son: "The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.232). Whether by accident, suicide or sacrifice, Gertrude drinks and dies on behalf of her son.

The Anglo-Saxon Wassail cup became associated not with the Communion cup, but, curiously, with "the Virgin and the infant Christ": The vessel-cup is made of holly and evergreens, like a bower, inside of which are placed either one or two dolls … wrapped in a veil and borne … by children … from house to house."[28] Gertrude's last drink, then, evokes for the Elizabethan audience, a neo-Pagan ceremony of communion and the nativity—Virgin and child—of Britain's submerged Catholicism.

Notes

1. Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women* (London: Routledge, 2000), 10.

2. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare,* 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997). Line references to Shakespeare's plays and poems correspond to this edition.

3. Callaghan, 10.

4. Callaghan, 10-11.

5. Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), 71.

6. Hughes, 234.

7. Dympna Callaghan, "Shakespeare: Poet or Playwright," (personal communication, Hall of Languages, Syracuse University, 2006).

8. Michael Flachmann, moderator, *Hamlet* Actors' Panel, annual meeting of the Wooden O Symposium, Utah Shakespearean Festival, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT, August 9, 2006.

9. Hughes, 239.

10. Hughes, 73.

11. Hughes, 75.

12. Hughes, 15.

13. Katharine A. Craik, "Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint* and Early Modern Criminal Confession," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2002): 10.

14. Craik, 2.

15. Craik, 2-3.

16. Hanna Scolnicov, "Gertrude's Willow Speech: Word and Film Image," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28 no. 2 (2000): 1.

17. Scolnicov, 2.

18. Scolnicov, 4.

19. Scolnicov, 6.

20. William S. Walsh, *Curiosities of Popular Customs and of Rites, Ceremonies, Observances, and Miscellaneous Antiquities* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1897), 683-85.

21. Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997, 1739n.

22. James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1981), 82.

23. Walsh, 683.

24. See Note 3.

25. Frazer, 20.

26. Walsh, 959.

27. Walsh, 980-81.

28. Walsh, 959.