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Under Pressure: Suicide, Gender, and Agency in *Hamlet*

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William Shakespeare is the most celebrated and influential writer of the English language, and *Hamlet* is the most celebrated and influential tragedy by Shakespeare. People who have never even read or seen the play performed know the basic plot, quotes, and other references. Through the centuries, *Hamlet* has generated its own canonical scholarship in Western literature that has generally been accepted by most readers and critics: a whining and misogynistic Hamlet, a lustful and unfaithful Gertrude, and a fragile and subservient Ophelia among other established roles and narratives. In recent years, however, scholars have approached the characters in *Hamlet* with more flexibility, revising some of these earlier scholarly orthodoxies. This thesis will contribute to this growing body of scholarship by addressing the issues of gender, suicide, and agency in *Hamlet*. In particular, I will examine how the disputed suicides of Ophelia and Gertrude participate in a larger portrayal of female agency. The two female characters in *Hamlet* are not the only instances of women's suicide in Shakespeare's works, and I will compare the situations of Lucrece, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra with those of Ophelia and Gertrude. This discussion of female suicide also provides a mode of comparison to the male discourse of suicide as presented by Hamlet and Horatio. In other words, by providing a more honest and accurate assessment of suicide in the late Elizabethan cultural and societal landscape, my project assigns greater nuance and value to the roles of *Hamlet*'s leading women.

Although this essay challenges conventional readings of Ophelia's and Gertrude's passivity, such interpretations are based in part on textual evidence. Consider Ophelia's death scene, which is one of the most romanticized deaths in Western drama. By placing the actual suicide offstage, Shakespeare contributes to the aura of passivity. We hear of it from the other central female character, Gertrude, who describes the death in dehumanizing but grand terms:

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like while they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
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. (Shakespeare IV. vii. 174-182)

The fact that Ophelia's death is from Gertrude's standpoint means that the reliability is in question. Note that Gertrude depicts Ophelia as less than human: she is "mermaid-like," as well as "a creature," and "a poor wretch." Observe also how most of the action is attributed to Ophelia's clothing and environment rather than to her. That appears to be the drowning of someone so removed from herself that she cannot save herself from a preventable death. The image is seen in numerous paintings of a fair-skinned young woman with billowing hair and clothes floating gracefully in a brook surrounded by a sea of flowers. The most famous of these paintings is *Ophelia* by Sir John Everett Millais completed between 1851 and 1852, which is on display in the Tate Britain in London. These visual representations of her, much like the older generation of scholars, sees her as a passive creature held captive by tragic circumstances only to be freed in death.

This essay, however, will argue that Ophelia's suicide is not her only form of agency, and it is not the completely passive death that it seems to be. Ophelia exhibits behavioral patterns throughout her scenes that contradict the forced label of passivity. Early modern suicide was

rarely considered as a passive action, and, as I will explain, few of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have seen it as such. At its core, Ophelia's suicide is an action with multiple nuanced implications and consequences. Indeed, the outcome of the entire play hinges on her death. Ophelia kills herself because the fate of Denmark is placed on her shoulders when she is asked to more or less spy on Hamlet, her father has been murdered (by her former lover no less), from the confusion created by her father and brother with regard to the meaning of love, and her suicide is even an act of revenge. Hamlet's eagerness to fight Laertes, who originally agreed to Claudius' wish for him to avenge Polonius, is established after Ophelia's death is the last of "the whips and scorns of time," that Hamlet could bear (III. i. 70). Upon confronting Laertes at Ophelia's grave, Hamlet challenges, "Why, I will fight him upon this theme / Until my eyelids no longer wag" (V. i. 251-252). In other words, Ophelia's death and proving his love for her are what inspire him to fight. When this fight is realized, the rest of the royal family dies in a matter of minutes.

Suicide in Early Modern England

To explore Ophelia's death further, a better contextual understanding of the contemporary perceptions of suicide is required, because suicide in Elizabethan England was a complex topic with religious, legal, and political implications, particularly relating to Christianity, Stoicism, and madness. Brian Cummings, in his book *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, and Identity in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, analyzes the wide variations of suicide in the period, in particular the complications of Christianity: "That Christian doctrine in all its forms condemned suicide is beyond doubt. The first systematic argument for prohibition was given by Augustine, who took a ban on suicide [...] as a simple extension of the fifth commandment ["Thou shall not kill"]. Suicide is murder like any other" (241). The concept of murdering oneself leads to the term "self-murder" or "self-slaughter" as Hamlet puts it (I. ii.

132). Cummings also mentions the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas who, although sympathetic to suicide, had three main reasons for its rejection: “First, suicide is against nature [...] Second [...] suicide is a sin against the community,” and “Third, [...] suicide is a sin against God” ultimately because “life is a gift from God, and nobody has the right to throw away such a gift” (Cummings 241). Such an offense to God is why a person who took their own life could be punished by law, even after death.

There were three forms of suicide or “doubtful death” acknowledged by law in Elizabethan England, as defined by scholar Sarah Gates in her article “Assembling the Ophelia Fragments: Gender, Genre, and Revenge in *Hamlet*.” She describes, “felo de se (self murder), non campos mentis (insanity), and ‘misfortune’ (accidental death)” (Gates 5). Gates then goes on to explain that, in the case of a doubtful death, “in the Elizabethan system the will could still be considered operative in a disturbed mind (though not always), so that where the will to self-murder was debatable, the preferred solution was to claim ‘misfortune’ or ‘accident’ in which the victims clearly did not want their own deaths” (Gates 5). Carol Thomas Neely also discusses this topic in her book *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. She writes, “If the act was judged self-murder, the deceased’s property was seized by the state and Christian burial was not encouraged. Madness, however, rendered suicide innocent and permitted conventional inheritance and Christian burial” (Neely 55). In the play, the issue of burial is addressed at Ophelia’s meagre funeral. She “is allowed her virgin crants” even though “her death was doubtful” because her place in the court allows more leniency (V. i. 211-216). The church and crown acknowledge her at least somewhat active role in her own death, as should readers. In this way her death remains “doubtful,” and “Ophelia has found her middle way first and leads the hero [Hamlet] to his,” as I will discuss later (Gates 6).

The different definitions of suicide and the firm stance against it also calls into question whether supposedly heroic acts, such as martyrdom, are willful self-murder. This topic was disputed extensively by some of Shakespeare's contemporaries.¹ There is also the issue of suicide as viewed in Stoicism. As Hamlet is dying, Horatio decides to kill himself declaring, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane," referring to the Stoic belief in noble death over ignoble life (V. ii. 327). Horatio's desire, though stopped by Hamlet, calls to mind Seneca whose suicide in the face of a death sentence has been an inspiration for the revenge tragedy from ancient times, a prominent one being *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, on which much of *Hamlet* is based.

One of the main disruptions of the play that makes it such a rich and complicated dramatic work is the pervasiveness of the threat of "madness" in the central characters. Terms such as "madness" and "distraction" are the vocabulary of the attempted understanding of the early modern period for what we now would usually refer to as mental illness. From this point on, I will use the terms and ideas of the Elizabethans that are politically incorrect and outdated to us today. Although this paper is primarily about Ophelia and Gertrude, Hamlet shares the theme of madness with Ophelia, as well as other parallels.

Ophelia exhibits more genuine mad or "distracted" behavior than Hamlet does in the eyes of the audience. Hamlet states that he will act mad in order to fool his family and others. Although we hear no such plan from Ophelia, it is possible that she also feigns madness in order to speak her mind more freely and to manipulate the perception of her suicide in order to insure a Christian burial. Even if she is truly mad, which is not at all unlikely considering the circumstances, that does not remove her agency. As stated previously, there is still a will in

¹ See John Donne's argument against Jesuit martyrdom in *Pseudo-Martyr* (London: 1610).

madness. Ophelia may truly be mad and still purposely use it to manipulate others' perceptions of her actions and drowning.

Neely describes the gendering of madness, writing, "distinctions between female distraction and feigned madness and melancholy are represented in *Hamlet*" (52). These distinctions result in the different reactions Claudius has to their madness: "Ophelia must be watched, contained within the family, within the castle; Hamlet must be expelled to England to be murdered" (Neely 55). Ophelia's treatment is really not much different than the treatment of sane and healthy women. Therein lies a great deal of the pressure that likely contributes to her madness or distraction. Neely also posits:

Perhaps the most important aspect of [Ophelia's] role is the contrast with Hamlet that it introduces. Ophelia in her mad scenes serves as a double for Hamlet during his absence from Denmark and from the play. His madness is in every way contrasted with hers, in part, probably, to emphasize the difference between feigned and actual madness, melancholy, and distraction. (Neely 54).

If nothing else, the many parallels between Ophelia and Hamlet can at least prove Ophelia's value as a character. Their similarities in madness provide an opportunity to contrast them in regards to suicide. Neely writes, "Whereas Hamlet's calm contemplation of suicide would render the act on his part a crime and a sin [...] Ophelia's suicide is depicted by Gertrude as accidental," hence the death is seen as doubtful rather than pure suicide (Neely 55).

Hamlet begins the play by expressing extreme grief, anger, and resentment, hinting at depression, and culminating in the contemplation of suicide. Many read this as him being mentally unstable from the very beginning, but it is actually a rather normal reaction to such a difficult situation: his father is recently deceased, his mother quickly marries his uncle whom he

does not like, he is no longer allowed to pursue his studies, and his emotions are constantly devalued. After meeting his father's ghost, Hamlet next plans to act mad in order to more easily investigate Claudius and exact his revenge. He decides, "To put an antic disposition on" (I. v. 172). A common argument is that Hamlet gets lost in his madness and goes mad for real. While it is true that Hamlet goes overboard in his acting and does not do things perfectly, he does not go mad. This is evident in Shakespeare using verse and prose form to differentiate between Hamlet's acting and true dialogue. When Hamlet is speaking in prose form he is acting, and when he is speaking in verse form he is being himself. In his soliloquies and conversations with Horatio, he is speaking in verse form like almost everyone else in the play. When he is very obviously acting, such as when he is making a fool of Polonius, he speaks in prose form. The acting prose form almost completely disappears after Hamlet is banished to England. The only other time Hamlet speaks in prose form is in scenes when he converses with common or less intelligent people such as Clown 1 and Osric in the first and second scenes of the fifth act, respectively.

One argument that Hamlet's madness becomes authentic is in his treatment of Ophelia. He rants to her, "Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners" (III. i. 121). It seems that he is blaming women for the sins of men, but considering all of this, his "nunnery" conversation with Ophelia is in prose form, he is acting. Looking more closely at the words themselves provides insight to his true intentions. Additionally, a closer look at Polonius is required. In his article "Doing and Performing in Hamlet," William O'Neill provides a neat and plausible explanation for both Polonius' and Hamlet's seemingly strange behavior regarding Ophelia. Hamlet's harsh treatment of her is one of the most controversial aspects of the play, and Polonius's sudden disdain for Hamlet, a man of royalty and heir to the throne, takes some deeper

reading to grasp. O'Neill states that Polonius is willing to allow the romance between the prince and his daughter as long as it helps him politically, but now that the king does not see eye to eye with his nephew/step son, Polonius does not want his family associated with Hamlet (O'Neill 122). Polonius' concern for and action regarding his own image and status is his form of agency, which includes removing his daughter's agency. Ophelia, in other words, is caught in the middle of a complex web of courtly politics.

O'Neill also analyzes when Hamlet calls Polonius a "fishmonger," which is another term for "whoremonger" or pimp according to Gordon Williams' *Shakespeare's Sexual Language: A Glossary*. (126). While Polonius sees this as more insanity, and the audience sees this as Hamlet being silly in his acting insane, "he is accusing Polonius of pandering his daughter for political advantage" (122). If this is so, then it can be argued that Hamlet's disturbing behavior towards his former lover is not truly hostile because, rather, he feels sympathy for her situation. He calls her "a breeder of sinners" more in anger at Polonius than at her. Unfortunately, he does not allow himself to communicate this to her in his act, and this confusion in addition to Hamlet claiming that he never loved her is part of what leads to her madness, act or not, and suicide.

In the belief of suicide being self-murder and taking one's own life from the church, country, and their family, it is evident how women in the time could use suicide as a form of agency: they remove themselves from the control of those who have power over them because of their gender. A person who is allowed no power, even over themselves, can gain some power over their individual person by removing themselves from the power of those controlling them and creating difficult circumstances for them after death.

Female Agency at the Danish Court

So far, most of this focuses on the decisions near the end of their lives, but both Ophelia and Gertrude demonstrate a consistent pattern of decisive actions throughout the play. Far from passive, Ophelia and Gertrude both employ their agency regularly. Agency itself is a living being's ability to act (or not act) and make decisions as well as how they do these things. People in different roles and statuses have different amounts of agency. Within *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Ophelia have less agency simply for being women. Others, like Horatio, have less agency due to their lower ranking social status compared to royalty, such as Hamlet, though Hamlet attempts to make Horatio closer to his equal (I. ii. 162). Horatio also still has the ability to make decisions for himself that women could not without the permission of a man, such as such a simple thing as travelling between Denmark and Germany. In other words, by "agency" I mean a character's ability to make their own decisions and act freely without the influence or obstruction of others. Regardless of the amount of agency given by society, every character in the play enacts their agency in some way, despite some arguments that interpret otherwise. For example, many scholars, such as Harold Bloom, assert that Ophelia is completely subservient to those around her. In his book *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, Bloom depicts Ophelia to be the "prime victim" and completely at the mercy of Hamlet's "astonishingly brutal verbal assault" (38-39). While he is sympathetic with her character, he does not give her the credit of being capable of acting for herself. He also gives a rather two-dimensional view of Hamlet as a monster that limits his agency as well, saying that Hamlet is the sole reason for Ophelia's ruin (Bloom 44).

While it is easy and common for scholars to argue that Ophelia and Gertrude have little to no agency as women, it is evident that the female characters make large impacts on the events of the play by acting on their own accords. Ophelia shows that she is at least her brother's equal

through dialogue, judges others with song and symbolic flowers, manipulates the perception of her death, and even uses her death as a mode of revenge. Gertrude, meanwhile, marries Claudius, influences the interpretation of Ophelia's death, promises to lie to Claudius for Hamlet (who is at that point her husband's enemy) and defies Claudius' wishes when he tells her not to drink the poison. Beginning with Ophelia, I will explore these instances further as well as argue that both of these women willfully commit suicide and enact their agency in life as well as death.

Ophelia's agency is illustrated in the first scene in which she speaks. After Laertes warns her against Hamlet's romantic advances, Ophelia tells her brother, "Do not [...] / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven / Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads, / and recks not his own rede" (I. iii. 47-51). Put simply, Laertes must practice what he preaches. Ophelia's ability to openly stand up to her brother, even if they are both meaning the best for each other, goes directly against the argument that Ophelia is just the puppet of the men in her life.

After speaking very little for so much of the play, in Act IV Ophelia finally gets to say what she thinks of everyone and gets people talking about the royal family and the court as the rare Gentleman character informs Gertrude:

She speaks much of her father, says she hears
There's tricks i' the world [...] Her speech is nothing,
Yet unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
And botch the words to fit their own thoughts. (IV. v. 4-10)

Thus Ophelia's vengeance for the murder of her father and the unfair treatment of herself begins. Ophelia is likely aware of her own political power, despite her lower status compared to those

around her. Even when she may be mentally unstable, she uses her power as a form of political rebellion. She continues by singing her judgments of the royal family, including Hamlet and the sexist double standards regarding romance and sex. She sings of a woman tricked into sleeping with a man when he promises to marry her, but then he goes back on his promise, thus ruining her whilst he remains unscathed by the experience (IV. v. 49-66). Not long after these songs, Ophelia drowns.

Ophelia's suicide is political largely because of her gender. Women are under the control of the men in their lives, which is shown when Polonius asserts that Ophelia's honor is his honor, and her actions have the potential to make him a fool if she does not listen to him (I. iii. 97-109). Polonius' power is a reason for Ophelia often being interpreted as meek and of not being a substantial character. Her suicide also represents the fractured nature of her family and country, as well as how the turmoil of the royal family extends to those around them. Another motive for suicide is that Hamlet, the man whom she loved and who loved her, suddenly claims to never have loved her and murders her father, as well as exhibiting other erratic behavior. Gertrude also puts Hamlet's sanity largely in Ophelia's responsibility when she says to her, "I hope your virtues / Will bring him to his wonted way again, / To both your honors" (III. i. 40-43). It could be argued that Ophelia subversively takes her own life in part to eliminate the potential vessel for the continuation of the royal bloodline. Gertrude laments, "I had hoped thou wouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" at Ophelia's funeral. This contradicts her father and brother warning her against the dangers of loving Hamlet.

Gates argues that there are parallels between Ophelia and Hamlet beyond Neely's comparisons of madness. Gates insists that, like Hamlet, Ophelia seeks vengeance. She writes, "Both characters thus find a middle way between guilt and innocence, Ophelia in an exploration

emphasizing the suicidal strand of the play's discussion of revenge, and Hamlet in an exploration emphasizing the vengeful one" (Gates 11). The similarities between suicide and vengeance blend together in Ophelia's vengeful suicide. Furthermore, "Ophelia's fate carries not only this vengeful feminist force; it also enacts that self-destruction that must occur in the revenger [Hamlet] if he is to become the killer of another," thus, in her revenge against him and leading to his demise, Ophelia also helps Hamlet achieve his goals (Gates 2). Ophelia's agency in death not only comes from taking her life, but also by creating chaos for the rest of the play.

Scholar Linda Welshimer Wagner does not appreciate Ophelia's importance and complexity, which is made clear in her article's title "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." The fact that Wagner's article was written in 1963 is very telling of her interpretation of Ophelia. Such an interpretation would not likely be taken seriously in recent years. Wagner declares Ophelia to be a minor character when she writes that Ophelia "does remain memorable amid Shakespeare's minor characters" (Wagner 97). "Memorable" is an understatement, and referring to her as a minor character is extremely inaccurate and misguided. Wagner states that because Ophelia is often overlooked by the other characters she is not necessary to the plot, and that Shakespeare purposely leads the audience to devalue her. She writes, "Shakespeare permits us to forget her, in the midst of other absorbing problems" (Wagner 94). On the contrary, this neglect of such an endearing, pitied character creates a bond between the audience and Ophelia that is felt quite sharply at Hamlet's cruel words directed at her and Gertrude's announcement of the young woman's drowning (Shakespeare IV. vii. 163).

Rather than being a "pathetic plot device," Ophelia's role can more accurately be described as a more relatable lens through which to view the play. The audience is likely shocked by Hamlet's outbursts directed at Ophelia, as is Ophelia. C. R. Resetarits, in her article

“Ophelia’s Empathic Function,” remarks on Ophelia being like the audience, because she is seen observing others more than acting or speaking, as stated in the following passage: “Often, she merely stands onstage, and like the audience, watches the actors play to her. This early role as an observer in the play creates a link between Ophelia and the audience that Shakespeare then exploits during her mad scenes to heighten the audience’s own empathic involvement” (216). Based on decorum and her social status, Ophelia usually has no place to speak unless she is addressed first, so it is not her lack of thinking that causes her reserve. She is also afforded a great deal of time to think about what she is hearing, seeing, and feeling while she is not speaking or acting. Shakespeare would not write a “minor character” such an important role. Resetarits’ observation is similar to the argument Richard Finkelstein makes in his article “Differentiating *Hamlet*: Ophelia and the Problems of Subjectivity.” He writes, “Ophelia’s rhetoric transforms us into judges who praise or blame Hamlet, disrupting that central identification [with Hamlet]” (Finkelstein 6). This disruption can create a bond between the audience and Ophelia more so than with Hamlet. Gertrude, speaking little and being accosted with her son’s blame plays a similar role.

Though Hamlet thinks that his mother is blindly led by her incestuous lust, Gertrude is quite aware of the fact that she married Claudius too quickly after King Hamlet’s passing. When Claudius announces, “He [Polonius] tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found / The head and source of all your son’s distemper,” she responds, “I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father’s death, and our o’erhasty marriage” (II. ii. 54-57). She understands that the marriage was too close to her late husband’s funeral, but she married Claudius for several possible reasons other than lust: power, the good of the country, or the royal family’s image. She also does not stay on the side of her husband. After the “closet scene,” Gertrude lies to Claudius, telling him

that Hamlet is “Mad as the sea and wind” and does not mention that Hamlet had stabbed Polonius under the impression that he was the king (IV. i. 7).

Similar to Wagner’s reading of Ophelia is Baldwin Maxwell’s interpretation of Gertrude in his 1964 article “Hamlet’s Mother,” the title itself implying Gertrude’s lack of substance by presenting her only in relation to her son. Many scholars agree with Hamlet’s condemnation of “frailty, thy name is woman,” at least in reference to Gertrude (I. ii. 146). Maxwell is one such scholar. He insists upon Gertrude’s weakness due to the fact that she speaks few lines, “fewer lines than does Ophelia” (Maxwell 236). I have already established my argument that having few lines does not equate to weakness. Maxwell also claims that “Too weak to determine any procedure for herself, [Gertrude] must rely upon others for guidance in every action” (241). Scholar Abigail L. Montgomery opposes Maxwell in her article “Enter Queen Gertrude Stage Center: Re-Viewing Gertrude as full Participant and Active Interpreter in *Hamlet*.” If one is to follow Maxwell’s theory that Gertrude only follows the instructions of others, such as Hamlet, then one must consider that Hamlet sees “Gertrude as an independent moral self operating under her own agency,” and her actions prove that point further (Montgomery 102).

R. Chris Hassel, Jr. also opposes the idea that Gertrude is a subordinate character to Hamlet and other men. Many scholars take Hamlet at his word, using his dialogue to try to prove arguments against others, such as the frail Gertrude argument. Hassel addresses Hamlet’s condemnation of Gertrude’s lust and corruption that is used to devalue her character in literary criticism. Hassel writes, “Hamlet in the first soliloquy and the bedroom scene asserts how frail his mother is in her literal carnality, but he is far from understanding [...] how similar his corrupted reason and understanding are to her corrupted flesh” (610). Maxwell, meanwhile, claims that Gertrude is inconsiderate in her actions and unaware of their implications, cementing

his argument that she is a lesser character for it (237). This logic would mean to devalue Hamlet, Maxwell's model of a superior character, because he exhibits the same inconsiderate behavior. Hamlet never considers the detrimental effects his actions will have on anyone besides himself and Claudius. It is this corrupted reasoning to which Hassel alludes. I am not attempting to devalue Hamlet in order to argue Gertrude's superiority, but I am demonstrating the lack of support such arguments that attempt to devalue the women based on the superiority of the men. Hassel puts Gertrude and Hamlet on the same level rather than Gertrude being a subordinate character. In this way, Hassel equalizes the genders.

Another argument against Gertrude is that she seems to be controlled by Claudius, firstly due to his rank as king and secondly due to his frequent ordering of "come, Gertrude," but it may be only because she lets him. Gertrude, the widowed queen, marries Claudius, no more than the brother of the late king, likely to preserve the stability of Denmark in the eyes of her citizens and the world after the great king's death. She is more so controlled by her devotion to her country, her image, or power from remaining queen. Of course, she still obeys him as the king, and in Elizabethan England a woman was expected to obey her husband. She does defy Claudius in the final scene of the play when she drinks from the cup that he poisoned. It is possible that Gertrude knows that the beverage has been poisoned, perhaps from Claudius's insistence on Hamlet drinking it, and drinks from it intentionally. Claudius orders her, "Gertrude, do not drink," and Gertrude replies, "I will, my lord. I pray you, pardon me," before she drinks it (V. ii. 277-278). This line might refer to God instead of Claudius. Though she does refer to Claudius as "my lord" throughout the play, if she does knowingly drink poison, it is more likely that she is asking forgiveness from God for her past sins, for which she obviously feels guilty, as well as the impending sin of suicide. Politically and interpreted as a suicide, Gertrude's death shows the

instability and conflict within her family which transfers on a larger scale to the entire nation. The death of the entire royal family coincides with the fall of the nation.

Gertrude finds a similar “middle way” to Ophelia in her death. Her suicide is not attributed to her by law because the poison is tied to Claudius (Gates 4). One motive for Gertrude’s suicide could be to attempt to save Hamlet from the poisoned cup. She displays her concerns and affection for her son more apparently in this scene than in most others before it. She voices her anxiety, “He’s fat and scant of breath” when he is fighting Laertes and then gives him her support with, “Here, Hamlet, take my napkin, rub thy brows. / The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet,” and a few lines later, “Come, let me wipe thy face” in a rather clichéd motherly way that is quite humorous when directed at her adult son (V. ii. 273-275, 280).

Another motive is that she sees the evil her husband is doing, and she wants to punish herself for her sins as well as her responsibility for giving Claudius the throne. When she and Hamlet finally have a heart-to-heart conversation in the antechamber of her room, Hamlet condemns her for her actions and she cries, “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. 89-91). Montgomery cites this as proof of her strength, because “this concern with her soul’s status underlines her status as a central, fully drawn character. Her anxiety for her soul is exactly that shared by Old King Hamlet [...], Claudius [...], and Hamlet himself” (102-103). From that point on the audience knows that she is not the shallow-minded queen that Hamlet had accused her of being for so long. Gertrude’s suicide, whether it is to save her son, to repent, or both, is rather noble.

Female Suicide in Shakespeare

Shakespeare appears to be intrigued by the idea of a strong female character taking her own life in an honorable Stoic manner. This fascination is evidenced by many of his works

following such characters. One example is *The Rape of Lucrece*, which is an epic poem rather than a play like *Hamlet* and the other works I will mention. The titular character commits suicide to escape her sin of being raped (as it was seen to be by most at the time, though she was simply the victim of a violent attack). Before she tells her husband and father who attacked her, Lucrece cries, “How may this forced stain be wip’d from me?” (*Lucrece* 1701). This idea of being ruined and stained is similar to Gertrude’s “black and grained spots” on her soul. While Lucrece is a victim of violence, it can be argued that Gertrude is a victim of circumstance. In addition to Claudius murdering King Hamlet, Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius is a catalyst for the events of the play. Lucrece’s death prompts a revengeful and justice-seeking uprising against her attacker, and Gertrude’s death is a part of what inspires Hamlet to finally kill Claudius.

Concurrently, while her relationship with Hamlet had been consensual, Ophelia must deal with society’s idea of her being stained by it. Even if they had not had sex (her songs suggest they might have) being in a romantic relationship not resulting in marriage was not proper. Similar to Lucrece asking that she be avenged, Ophelia uses her suicide itself as vengeance. Before killing herself, Lucrece commands, “Be suddenly revenged on my foe,” “let the traitor die, / For sparing justice feeds iniquity,” and “chase injustice with revengeful arms” (*Lucrece* 1683-1693). Though Lucrece is a victim who cannot physically seek revenge due to her own bodily weakness, her strength of character and downright aggression enables her to dictate others to do it for her. Her demands also keep her husband from killing himself out of grief to complete her vengeance, and her suicide is the catalyst for the revolution that overthrows the Tarquin monarchy (*Lucrece* 1855). Ophelia’s strength in killing herself and moving those around her also results in a more tragic (in that three people who are not really bad die) though equally as

effective end. Lucrece's father and husband even quarrel over whose grief is stronger, similar to Hamlet and Laertes fighting for their love of Ophelia.

In *Macbeth*, one of Shakespeare's other most well-known tragedies, Lady Macbeth is comparable to Gertrude in several ways. Both women are the wives of powerful men, and they both influence their husbands in ways that are important to the plots of the plays. Gertrude is the one who gives Claudius the throne, and Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth on how to attain the throne. Lady Macbeth is much more manipulative and even emotionally and psychologically abusive to Macbeth, while Gertrude asserts herself in less obtrusive ways. Though they do differ in their general attitudes regarding the use of their influence, such as Lady Macbeth being much less maternal, Gertrude's and Lady Macbeth's suicides are alike. Gertrude's suicide is in guilt, as is Lady Macbeth's. After being responsible for her husband murdering many people, Lady Macbeth's guilt is evident when she sleepwalks and complains that she cannot wash the blood stains from her hands (*Macbeth* V. i. 43). Though her suicide is announced when she is offstage, like Ophelia, her deteriorating mental state is enough evidence that she took her life from guilt for her involvement in taking the lives of others, just as Gertrude's suicide can be argued to be inspired in part by her guilt for the consequences of marrying Claudius.

Ophelia has less in common with Lady Macbeth than Gertrude does, but like Ophelia, Lady Macbeth's suicide is not witnessed by the audience or the lead character. After hearing the "cry of women" Seyton tells Macbeth, "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (*Macbeth* V. v. 8, 16). She gets none of the poetic announcement that Gertrude gives Ophelia. Macbeth hardly even seems upset. He just briefly contemplates the nature of life and death. The brevity of the announcement and response of other characters compared to the lavish mourning of Ophelia's death may have

to do with the the morality of the deceased; Lady Macbeth is violent and selfish, and Ophelia is generally loving and the victim of other characters' selfishness.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra is a political leader whose power and agency cannot be doubted. Cleopatra is the Queen of Egypt as Gertrude is the Queen of Denmark, but Cleopatra is the sole ruler of her country while Gertrude is second to a king. When Cleopatra discovers that the false suicide that she planned to make Antony realize how much he loves her backfires in the form of him committing suicide, Cleopatra kills herself in Stoic manner to avoid being publicly shamed in Rome and used by Caesar's political program. (*Antony* V. ii. 313). Cleopatra is also known for her sexuality, and Gertrude, whether or not she actually loves Claudius, expresses her sexuality in her second marriage, but it is more often described as incestuous lust (*Hamlet* I. ii. 157).

Though Cleopatra is a queen and Ophelia is only the daughter of the king's adviser, they share significant traits. Before the events of the play take place, Ophelia is in a relationship with Hamlet, a man of royalty, in which romantic feelings are shared. Laertes does not deem it appropriate for her to have such an informal relationship in which her honor or virtue could be compromised. Ophelia's sexual agency is similar to Cleopatra's use of her sexuality, which is seen as a threat to the men in the play. After pledging his love for Cleopatra, Antony is forced to marry Octavia, the sister of Octavius, one of his fellow triumvirs, in order to placate any political tension between them. This seeming betrayal of love leads to Cleopatra's heartbreak, jealousy, and eventual downfall, though she and Antony reconcile their love before they both die. Ophelia experiences similar emotions in her bafflement in regards to Hamlet's denial of his love for her. She feels betrayed, foolish, and used. Unfortunately, Ophelia drowns herself before she can see that Hamlet still loved her.

While *Hamlet* is the only Shakespeare play that is clearly about suicide rather than just featuring it, all of the works I have covered involve powerful women negotiating political circumstances at court, exercising even in death a remarkable degree of agency. Although women are given less agency than men, male characters can use suicide as a form of agency as well.

Male Suicide in *Hamlet*

Another role of discussing suicide in regards to Ophelia and Gertrude is to enrich of the discussion of the male characters in *Hamlet*, most notably the titular character himself. Hamlet famously soliloquizes about suicide multiple times. The following passage are some of the most well-known lines in the play and Western literature overall:

To be, or not to be: that is the question.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them? (III. i. 56-60)

Hamlet wonders if it is worse for him to live passively in a world that constantly abuses him or to kill himself on his own terms, in Stoic style, therefore not allowing the abusive life to defeat him. Hamlet refers to death as sleep several times. He says, "To sleep, perchance to dream" (III. ii. 65) as speculation that there might be an afterlife. He also states that this afterlife is so mysterious and unproven that it is the only reason why people put up with the difficulties of life. Ophelia, a supposedly fragile young maid, has the strength and courage to face death and the afterlife that Hamlet could not muster through most of the play until he drinks the poison after his death is already imminent from being stabbed with the poison-tipped sword. Hamlet is not a

coward for fearing the illegal and blasphemous act, but it is probable that Ophelia has similar internal conflicts regarding suicide that we do not get to see, and she chooses the unknown and the possibility of God's punishment over suffering in life.

Though Hamlet can never bring himself to take his own life like Ophelia, he finds a way to end his life, prove his love for Ophelia, and get his revenge at the same time. These accomplishments, though tragic, are in no small part thanks to Ophelia. Her death sparks Hamlet's need to prove his love for her and his inspiration to fight. The duel against Laertes is rather suicidal. Hamlet fights Laertes despite Horatio's warnings that Hamlet is not skilled enough and offering to put off the duel: "You will lose the wager, my lord" and "I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit" (V. ii. 195, 203-4). While a clean duel would only result in minor wounds that would not normally be lethal, Hamlet is too smart not to know that Claudius is trying to kill him, especially after the letter he found and showed to Horatio which ordered that his "head should be struck off" (V. ii. 24). He goes through with the fight anyway. Gates explains this saying that Hamlet's action "insures the guilt for first-degree murder will fall upon Claudius for the deaths of everyone in the room, including those of Hamlet and Claudius himself" (6). In that, as well as physically stabbing Claudius with the poisoned blade, Hamlet gets his revenge on Claudius, punishing him for murder and proving him to be a murderer. At the end of the duel, only Horatio will have to live with the grief.

Horatio's entire purpose in life from the moment he reunites with Hamlet is to assist the prince. In his subservience to Hamlet he is effeminized (in the eyes of Elizabethans), though he at least partly chooses his position. Horatio's choice to serve Hamlet contrasts with Ophelia's complete lack of choice in being treated as lesser than her father and brother. Horatio is burdened with the same responsibility for Hamlet as Ophelia is, but unlike Ophelia who has a brother, it

seems that Hamlet is Horatio's only responsibility. When Horatio's purpose in life is about to perish with his friend, he finally tries to take control of his life by killing himself, directly referencing Stoicism, but Hamlet stops him. To keep Horatio from drinking the rest of the poison, Hamlet takes it like Gertrude may have tried to keep the poison from Hamlet before him (V. ii. 330). Hamlet, and all of the others who have died, will live on in Horatio. Hamlet instructs him, "So tell [Fortinbras], with the occurrents, more or less, / Which have solicited" (V. ii. 343-344). Although Hamlet deprives Horatio of controlling his own life, Hamlet restores meaning. Horatio's survival is crucial. He is given the most responsibility out of every other character in the play. Not only is he, like Ophelia, responsible for Hamlet, and therefore Denmark, but he is also solely responsible for the entire play. In his article "Horatio's Philosophy in *Hamlet*," Andrew Hui writes, "[Horatio's] ultimate purpose in the play, then, is to bear witness to his closest friend, to turn Hamlet into *Hamlet*" (153). If Horatio had died, Fortinbras and the rest of the world would presumably be ignorant of what had transpired in Denmark.

Ophelia and Gertrude, while having fewer lines and having to obey the commands of the men in their lives, demonstrate an incredible amount of power and agency. Ophelia uses madness to her advantage, Gertrude influences the legal perception of Ophelia's death, and they both use their own deaths as subversive acts against the court. The political and cultural landscape of Elizabethan England inspired Shakespeare to write many female characters in his other works who exhibited similar acts of agency, though *Hamlet* is the only play of his that is specifically about the conflicts of suicide. It is also one of Shakespeare's most popular works because it is such a rich text that practically everything about it has been constantly debated for centuries, the roles of Ophelia and Gertrude being no exception; they have been misconstrued by scholars since its publication, but more recent scholars, myself included, are reconstructing the scholarly canon

to provide more accurate analyses of the much misunderstood female characters, who, with their male counterparts, will likely continue to intrigue and dominate the dramatic world for the foreseeable future.

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