

# The Condemned and Condoned Mona Lisa: The Unique Characterization of Shakespeare's Gertrude

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**Abstract** Among the most interesting female characters in Shakespeare's oeuvre is *Hamlet's* Gertrude. Many studies have been conducted on the critical study of the character of Hamlet's mother. Critics have split in their views of Gertrude. Many condemn her and view her as an embodiment of the "frailty" her son used to describe her "weak" and "shallow" gender; some even go far enough to suggest a role in her husband's murder. Other critics have accepted the apparition's word "adulterate" to convict her. On the other hand, other critics condole with Gertrude and see in her character marks of the "dull and shallow" type to think of murder. She is the malleable, weak character. Feminist critics, however, came forward to highlight traits in her character deliberately ignored by male critics and insist that Gertrude is "intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech". This paper focuses rather on Shakespeare's unique depiction of Gertrude's character. Such excellence in the representation of this character is strikingly brilliant by making the depiction of a character that provides ample textual proof equally to either side of the critics, condemners and condolers. In this, Gertrude stands matchless. She is the Mona Lisa who keeps smiling wherever you stand to look. No other Shakespearean character is exclusively undecided, providing critics and readers with enough substance for the two opposing factions. Thus, the unconventional character of Gertrude is another manifestation of Shakespeare's brilliance.

**Keywords** Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Gertrude, Characterization

## 1. Introduction

For centuries, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has attracted extensive studies. Like in all Shakespearean tragedies, *Hamlet's* characters are generally classified between forces of goodness and forces of evil. Not two critics would disagree in classifying Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus, Barnardo, Francisco as the faction of goodness. The faction of evil would compromise of Claudius and all other who back him

include Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and later Laertes. The character of Gertrude, however, stands alone defying the conventional classification of either virtuous or evil. It is, indeed, unique in being framed undecided and genuinely unsettled. Shakespeare's depiction of this female character has been the topic of many lengthy studies. However, little is said, if any, on Shakespeare's excellence, as a playwright, in shaping a character that stands remarkable in providing critics, who are "cleft in twain", of the conflicting standpoints with ample textual evidence to support either view. This paper aims at highlighting Shakespeare's brilliance in sketching the exceptional character of Gertrude.

The several studies conducted on the character of Gertrude are split between two distinctive factions: condemners and condoners, Gertrudians and anti-Gertrudians.

The character of Queen Gertrude can be debated broadly because of its fascinating amalgam of malevolence and reverence. A careful reading of the play would prove that Shakespeare did not create this character casually.

Thus, Shakespeare has depicted a character that is both active and passive, honorable and dishonorable, benevolent and malevolent. Hence, critics condoled and condemned her.

The reader meets a uniquely structured type of woman in Hamlet's mother, the Danish Queen. She is at once the most honored but also the woman upon whom sever and most rigorous social assumptions are imposed.

Gertrude's most boisterous critic is but her own very son. Hamlet's contempt of his mother's conduct in her hasty marriage is emphasized even before he learns of his father's unlawful murder. Hamlet's notion of women's "frailty" is fueled:

"Within a month,  
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!  
It is not, nor it cannot come to good." (I. ii.156-163).

Hamlet's denunciation of his mother's weakness is projected onto the whole gender. Thus, Ophelia is victimized as a consequence. Gertrude becomes the source for breeding

Hamlet's grudge against women as well as instigating his subsequent "lunacy" and rash behaviour.

In the eyes of her son, Gertrude fails in many respects. She did not remain loyal to the memory of her husband in the way a loving wife is expected to be:

".....Why she, even she—  
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourned longer!—married with my  
uncle" (I, ii, 153-155)

Several critics adopted Hamlet's denunciation of his mother's conduct together with the Ghost's sever words, to condemn the character.

## 2. The Split of the Critics over Gertrude's Character

In his *The Masks of Hamlet*, Marvin Rosenberg argues that Gertrude's critics "have traditionally judged her in two ways: by her silence and by what others say of her", [41]. "Gertrude, in her silence", Rosenberg adds, "will have much to show...the audience fill the silence for themselves".

Rosenberg observes that Gertrude does not draw from reviewers as much attention as Claudius, as Hamlet of course or as Ophelia; but the glances her way refract essential qualities in her characterization, [41].

What Rosenberg fails to notice is the richness of the depiction of Gertrude's character and not her character per se.

The same meek Gertrude, the character who is viewed by many as weak, fickle, and dependent, is the very character who takes a queenly stand against the mutinous Laertes as he rampages the court seeking King Claudius over the murder of his father. Gertrude stands firm behind the King showing royal determination and energy against rebels labeling them "false Danish dogs".

This diversity in the character is what makes up for the split in her critics. Critics such as Dover Wilson [50], and Baldwin Maxwell [38] who argue that Gertrude was Claudius's mistress before King Hamlet's death, find their support in Ghost's statement. Wilson even goes so far as to assert dogmatically that these lines can only mean that Gertrude was Claudius's mistress [38].

Interestingly, Gertrude herself has little to say in defense or explanation of her decision, which has left the interpretation of her motives and even her mental state up to the judgment of several literary critics, many of whom have been as brutal and unforgiving as Hamlet in their condemnation of Gertrude's behavior. An alternate reading, however, may yield other possible meanings. Regardless of whether Shakespeare intended the reader to condone or to condemn Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius after the death of her husband, the fact that the Queen did, in fact, choose to do so, and further, that she refused to explain or defend herself and was willing to risk alienation from her beloved son all suggest that Gertrude was a bold and brave woman who was strong enough to challenge social norms by

rejecting them altogether.

Although Hamlet does not answer the very conundrum he poses in the famous soliloquy "To be or not to be," Gertrude does so through her actions. It is better, she seems to say, to "take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them" than to "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (III.i.55-59).

In the essay "Hamlet and his problems" T. S. Eliot suggests that the main cause of Hamlet's internal dilemma is Gertrude's sinful behaviour. He states, "Shakespeare's Hamlet... is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son." [16]

Gertrude's 'adultery' case has attracted several critics into factions. Critics have been sharply divided over the nature of Gertrude's guilt. Many, following A. C. Bradley, maintain the extraordinary charge that she committed adultery before King Hamlet's death, whereas others, following John Draper maintain her innocence. In *The Masks of Hamlet*, Marvin Rosenberg classifies the critics into two groups: the apologists, who argue that adultery is not proved, and the skeptics, who claim that adultery is proved. The primary evidence supporting the skeptics' position lies in the Ghost's charge that Claudius, "... that incestuous, that adulterate beast,/... won to his shameful lust / The will of my most seeming virtuous queen" (I.v.42-46). The apologists would maintain, according to Rosenberg [41], "that the Ghost's reference to "adulterate beast" extends the meaning of adultery, as is common in biblical scriptures, to unchastity generally". The belief, according to Haverkamp [24], in the promiscuous nature of Gertrude has been cogent enough for some critics to contend that Hamlet is Claudius's son. Jenkins [27] suggests that Gertrude had adulterous relations with Claudius; otherwise, the Ghost's revelation of an incestuous relation, which, according to the norms of the day, was, among others, ascribed to a conjugal bond between a widow and his late husband's brother, provides no substantial evidence of which Hamlet is nescient. In other words, the ghost apprizes Hamlet of his mothers' adulterous nature. Theodore Lidz's [33] argument is that the text of Hamlet attests to the Ghost's dismay as a consequence of being cuckolded by an ostensibly virtuous wife. Lidz contends that the collapse of Hamlet's expectations of Gertrude as mother and as the epitome of female virtues results in Hamlet's generalization of infidelity as a feminine trait per se and, eventually, in his calumny of Ophelia. Lidz views Hamlet's indignation at his mothers' second marriage as a result of his patriarchal attitudes. Lidz suggests that Hamlet is convinced that Gertrude has reached a certain age when a woman's sexual desires has to be restrained by self-reserve; hence, Hamlet's exasperation may not be a symptom of oedipal conflicts, but a consequence of masculine or traditional expectations of a woman at the age of Gertrude.

Baldwin Maxwell [36] argues that Gertrude is weak until the end of the play where the only act that demonstrates independence ironically causes her death. Linda Bamber's *Comic Women, Tragic Men* [3] goes even further to claim

that the misogyny of the play reduces Gertrude to a 'vessel for Hamlet's feelings' with little independence as a character. Janet Adelman [1] reads Gertrude as the first in a series of female characters whose sexuality and reminders of maternal origin threatens masculine identity in the plays. G. B. Shand (1994) offers a performance-based approach, arguing that drinking the cup is an act of suicide to which Gertrude is driven. Greg Bentley [5] contends that Gertrude's drinking at the end of the play is an assertion of her new, manly subjectivity and a rejection of female roles. James Stone [47] argues that Gertrude is in possession of an insatiable devouring orality which renders men who marry her impotent and sexually hollow. Gertrude has no choice but to live adulterously to gratify her ever-increasing urge for coition.

By contrast, substantial evidence that Gertrude did not commit adultery before King Hamlet's death lies in the dumb show that Hamlet stages to "catch the conscience of the King" (II.ii.605). This show presents a sequence of events in which the poisoner first kills the King, exits, and then afterward reenters and courts the Queen, who resists before being seduced. The pantomime of the subplay does not in any way indicate that the Queen committed adultery with Claudius before King Hamlet was murdered but does, in fact, suggest that the Queen's affair with Claudius arose after the King's death. The dumb show dramatizes the Ghost's earlier statement that Claudius seduced Gertrude "With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts" (I.v.43). Critics who persist in branding Gertrude an adulteress must now reconcile the seeming inconsistency between the evidence of the dumb show and what they see as the Ghost's explicit statement on adultery. The Queen, it is evident married a second time with indecent haste. It is not evident, however, if she was false to her first husband while he lived. On the other hand, she was certainly not privy to the murder of her husband, either before the deed, or after it. There is no sign of her being so, and there are clear signs that she was not.

None of the critics fails to see Gertrude as vital to the action of the play; not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off," occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost.

Gertrude's characterization in *Hamlet* is extensively analyzed with regard to her infidelity, promiscuity, and ostensibly virtuous nature. Further, much criticism on Gertrude is based on the content of Hamlet and the Ghost's parlance which, according feminist critics is male-oriented in perspective.

Many critics viewed the character as an embodiment of both the malleable and weak personality who is easily condemned as the materialization of her son's curse: "Frailty thy name is women".

The critical discourse on Gertrude mainly addresses her flaws: concupiscence, adultery, indiscretion, to name a few, and the tragic consequences of these flaws for the other

characters of the play. Albeit her meager part in *Hamlet*, her role is symptomatically destructive, if not for the whole state of Denmark, for many characters within the play.

The monstrosity of Gertrude's lubricious nature cannot be explained in earthly terms. As such, Hamlet evokes cosmic imagery to explain the iniquity of his mother's sensuality:

A rhapsody of words! Heaven's face doth glow;  
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,  
With tristful visage, as against the doom,  
Is thought-sick at the act. (III, iv, 48-51).

John Hankins suggests that such imagery of Gertrude's lewdness has made the sky to blush with shame and the earth to wear a sorrowful countenance [21].

Elizabeth Watson [49] claims that the obscenity of Gertrude's sexual promiscuity in elaborating on the term "union" in *Hamlet*—"The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath, / And in the cup an union shall he throw" (V. ii.268-9)—argues that Gertrude symbolizes the biblical figure the Whore of Babylon. Gertrude's sexuality, in Traub's opinion, is both rampant and epidemic, for, according to the patriarchal themes of *Hamlet*, her "adultery turns all women into prostitutes and all men into potential cuckolds" [48].

Bethell [6] argues Gertrude, based on textual evidence, is a lewd woman who has preferred a satyr and a swinish life and thus her account of Ophelia's death testifies to her sinister and hypocritical nature. Hence, Bethell views Gertrude's rashness and tactlessness (in Act 3, Scene 4) which results in the death of Polonius, though the queen does not—in her report to the king—refer to her own tactless reprimands: "Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue" (III, iv,10); to her threatening remarks: "Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak" (III, iv, 16); to her unfounded apprehension: "What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?" (III, iv, 20); and finally, to her pusillanimous invocation of help: "Help, ho!" (III, iv, 21). Without holding herself responsible for the death of Polonius, Gertrude in lays all blame on her son—or, one may contend, on her son's madness—and thus portrays the whole tragic incident as follows:

.....In his lawless fit  
Behind the arras hearing something stir,  
Whips out his rapier, cries 'A rat, a rat!'  
And in this brainish apprehension kills  
The unseen good old man. (III, i, 8-12).

On the other hand, Allan Sinfield [43] argues that Gertrude is generally regarded by critics as an unproblematic character, yet she reveals her sophistication and obstinacy on various occasions; Hamlet, for example, urges her to adopt a life of repentance and abstinence:

.....Confess yourself to heaven;  
Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;  
And do not spread the compost on the weeds  
To make them ranker. (III, iv, 151-4)

Yet, there is no convincing textual evidence that reveals

Gertrude's compliance with her son's moralistic pieces of advice. Thus agency for Gertrude is to continue her sexual relation with Claudius despite Hamlet's ethical teachings.

A rather similar observation is mentioned by Spinrad [45] who argues that Hamlet's vehement upbraiding of his mother reveals vestiges of the sixteenth century sermons which would elicit repentance from the audience. Despite being advised to eschew sex and despite evidence for the possibility of leading an abstemious life, Hamlet's text is mute as to Gertrude's consent. Thus one possible aspect of Gertrude's agency is that she continues her so-called incestuous life despite being advised not to.

Alan Sinfield [43] opines that the other plausible instance of agency is manifested in Gertrude's muteness as to Claudius's imperatives which may be interpreted as resistance. Gertrude is silent to Claudius's amorous overtures: "O Gertrude, come away" (IV, i, 28); "Come, Gertrude" (IV, i, 38); "O come away" (IV, i, 44). It may be argued that Gertrude remains unresponsive to these sexual requests because she has been urged by Hamlet to avoid intercourse with the king, or simply she may not be in the mood of having coitus. In general, Gertrude appears to be voiceless on all occasions when Claudius addresses her: "O Gertrude, Gertrude" (IV.v.73), "O my dear Gertrude" (IV.v.77), and "Let's follow Gertrude" (IV.vii.190). However, the same mute Queen, who even defends Claudius against the bellicose revengeful Laertes (IV.v.126), converses with Hamlet and these are such moments when her interiority, i.e. her inner thoughts and emotions, is disclosed and gains significance, though different texts of *Hamlet* differ from one another in the scope of disclosing Gertrude's interiority.

Hence, Gertrude's agency is conjectural, and her silence subject to contradictory interpretations, for textual evidence is not lucid as to her concurrence with Hamlet's moralistic advice or to her determination, through reticence, to shun Claudius's several invitations for coition.

Linda Charnes [11] contends that Gertrude is not an utterly lecherous character, yet Hamlet magnifies the evilness of his mother's lechery, for he can only attain the status of a classical hero if moral turpitude and vice spread throughout the play from Claudius to Gertrude and then to Ophelia. Gertrude's promiscuity is, according to Kinney [27], inferred from the other characters' impressions of her, for her lines in the play do not yield an aura of immorality. Stevenson [46] argues that Hamlet's disgust of his mother's sexuality may not be the consequence of his mother's lewdness but the result of his apprehensions concerning his mother's giving birth to a new heir; this implies that it is the possibility of loss of kingship which has enraged Hamlet. Alan Sinfield [43] mentions that the emotions of some women characters such as Gertrude are not elemental in the imaginative structure of Shakespearean drama especially during the moments of resolution at the end of the plays.

Despite these critiques on Gertrude which either find her character reprehensibly lewd or attempt to exonerate her and prove her to be a victim of political conflicts within the play

and the larger structure of contemporaneous patriarchal attitudes toward women in Shakespeare,

Critics who censure Gertrude do on the grounds of her possible betrayal of her former husband or over-charged sensuality or even simply being malleable distinguished by her naiveté and gullibility.

To Bradley [9], Gertrude:

"was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun, and to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy, like more sheep in the sun. . . . It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces around her, and foolish and unkind in Hamlet to persist in grieving for his father instead of marrying Ophelia and making everything comfortable. . . . 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."

Freud and Jones see her, the object of Hamlet's Oedipus complex, as central to the motivation of the play. Several critics have accepted Hamlet's word "frailty" as applying to her whole personality, and have seen in her not one weakness, or passion in the Elizabethan sense, but a character of which weakness and lack of depth and vigorous intelligence are the entire explanation. Of her can it truly be said that carrying the "stamp of one defect," she did "in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault" (I.iv.35-36).

Several critics agree that lust, the desire for sexual relations, as the passion, in the Elizabethan sense of the word, the flaw, the weakness which drives Gertrude to an incestuous marriage, appalls her son, and keeps him from the throne. They explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman.

These critics, including A. C. Bradley among them [9], claim that the elder Hamlet clearly tells his son that Gertrude has committed adultery with Claudius in the speech beginning "Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.41). Dover Wilson presents the argument:

Is the Ghost speaking here of the o'er-hasty marriage of Claudius and Gertrude? Assuredly not. His "certain term" is drawing rapidly to an end, and he is already beginning to "scent the morning air." Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hastening to "incestuous sheets." Why then should the Ghost waste precious moments in telling Hamlet what he was fully cognizant of before? . . . Moreover, though the word "incestuous" was applicable to the marriage, the rest of the passage is entirely inapplicable to it. Expressions like "witchcraft", "traitorous gifts", "seduce", "shameful lust", and "seeming virtuous" may be noted in passing. But the rest of the quotation leaves no doubt upon the matter. [50]

Gertrude strikes Rosamond Putzel as malleable: "She is throughout, domestic, malleable, and ductile— never original or thoughtful or independent, never vicious." [38].

Gertrude is first seen in Act 1 Scene ii as she tries to cheer Hamlet over the loss of his father, begging him to stay at home rather than going back to school in Wittenberg. Her worry over him continues into the second act, as she sides with King Claudius in sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to raise the spirits of her son:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. (I, ii,  
68-69)

And

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.  
I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg. (I, ii,  
118-119)

The above excerpt can be read differently by the two factions of critics: Gertrudians take the Queen's stance as an exemplification of the tender care of a compassionate mother for the welfare of a crestfallen son. The same excerpt can, equally, be cited by anti-Gertrudians who see an obedient wife blindly making every effort to show her liege to win the favour of her King husband whose evil intentions are shown in the undertone of his address to Hamlet:

And we beseech you, bend you to remain  
Here, *in the cheer and comfort of our eye* (I, ii,  
115-116) emphasis added.

In another occasion, when, rather than ascribing Hamlet's sudden madness to Ophelia's rejection (as thought by Polonius), she believes the cause to be his father, King Hamlet's death and her quick, subsequent marriage to Claudius:

I doubt it is no other but the main,  
His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage. (II, ii,  
56-57)

Condolers with the character of the Queen refer to the shrewdness of the above observation as a demonstration of the integrity and independence of the character of Gertrude defying those critics who view her as a Claudius finger-puppet.

In Act three, she eagerly listens to the report of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on their attempt to cheer him, and supports the King and Polonius' plan to watch Hamlet from a hidden vantage point as he speaks with Ophelia, with the hope that her presence will heal him.

In the next act, Gertrude tells Claudius of Polonius' murder, convinced that Hamlet is truly mad. She also shows genuine compassion and affection as she watches along with others as Ophelia sings and acts in absolute madness. At Ophelia's burial, she expresses her former hope that the young woman might have married her son: "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife." (V, i, 230) When Hamlet appears and grapples with Laertes, she asks him to stop and for someone to hold him back—saying that he may be in a fit of

madness now, but that will alleviate soon. At the beginning of the play, Gertrude lies more with her husband than her son; however, after the closet scene the whole situation is switched.

In the final scene, Gertrude notices Hamlet is tired during the fight with Laertes, and offers to wipe his brow. She drinks a cup of poison intended for Hamlet by the King, against the King's wishes, and dies, shouting in agony as she falls: "No, no, the drink, --O my dear Hamlet,-- The drink, the drink! I am poison'd." (V, ii, 294-95)

Other characters' views of the Queen are largely negative. When the Ghost of her former husband appears to Hamlet, he describes her as a "seeming virtuous queen", but orders Hamlet not to confront her about it and leave her judgment to heaven. However, he also expresses that his love for her was benevolent as he states that he would have held back the elements if they "visited her face too roughly".

Hamlet sees her as an example of the weakness of women (which affects his relationship with Ophelia) and constantly hurt in his reflections of how quickly (less than a month) she remarried.

Gertrude's last words show affection towards her son. She does not confess to any sins before she dies which suggests she was naive about the "corruption" in Denmark. Therefore, Gertrude is most likely an honest queen and a passionate mother (which is debatable depending upon interpretation) as she makes no attempts to ease her conscience regarding whether she would be sent to Heaven or Hell (the Christian ethos formed a backdrop to the play as a technique used by Shakespeare).

Other considerations point to Gertrude's complicity in the murder of Hamlet's father. After repeated erratic threats towards his mother to no response, Hamlet threatens to discover the true nature of Gertrude's character by setting up a mirror at which point she projects a killer:

Hamlet:  
Come, come, and sit you down, you shall not budge;  
You go not till I set you up a glass  
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

Queen:  
What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?  
Help ho! (III, iv, 18-22)

Carolyn Heilbrun's 1957 essay "Hamlet's Mother" defends Gertrude, arguing that the text never hints that Gertrude knew of Claudius poisoning King Hamlet. This analysis has been championed by many feminist critics. Heilbrun argued that men have for centuries completely misinterpreted Gertrude, believing what Hamlet said about her rather than the actual text of the play. By this account, no clear evidence suggests that Gertrude is an adulteress: she is merely adapting to the circumstances of her husband's death for the good of the kingdom.

In the closet scene, she, innocently, inquires:  
What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue  
In noise so rude against me? (III, iv, 2429)  
And later,

Ah me, what act,  
That roars so loud and thunders in the index?  
(III,iv,2443)

These words cannot be but the gesticulations of a woman totally obtuse of not only of her husband's murder but also the guilt she, herself, committed. When her son does manage to awaken her, she pleads:

O, speak to me no more!  
These words like daggers enter in mine ears...  
(III,4,2489)

The author's endeavour, nevertheless, is fraught with problems. Gertrude is, after all, one of Shakespeare's most elusive female characters, and one over which criticism (feminist and otherwise) has long debated. The most common representation would see her, as Hamlet and the Ghost do, as a lustful, adulterous and incestuous woman.

Rebecca Smith [44] has a similar view in seeing Gertrude as a "compliant, loving, unimaginative woman whose only concern is pleasing others . . . malleable, submissive, totally dependent, and solicitous of others at the expense of herself."

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* represents for many feminist critics an example of how literary artists portray instances of patriarchal domination.

Rebecca Smith believes that Gertrude's sexuality has been over-determined by the men in the play and responds by completely ignoring her sensuality as well as other aspects of her personality. Smith disputes the image of Gertrude as a highly sexualized character, and argues that she is "totally dependent," "malleable," "nurturing," and "submissive" [44]. This interpretation completely ignores Gertrude's sensuality and overlooks other subtleties of character that define her humanness.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun [24] believes that critics who deprecate Gertrude fail to see Gertrude for the strong minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion, sensible woman that she is. Some critics, having accepted Gertrude as a weak and vacillating woman, see no reason to suppose that she did not fall victim to Claudius' charms before the death of her husband and commit adultery with him.

Heilbrun argues that Gertrude's speeches have been "short, warm and loving, and conciseness of statement is not the mark of a dull and shallow woman." For this purpose, Heilbrun cites many quotes that show Gertrude's astute logic and directness. Heilbrun cites the example when Gertrude, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court, hoping, with the King, that they may cheer Hamlet and discover what is depressing him. Claudius then tells Gertrude, when they are alone, that Polonius believes he knows what is upsetting Hamlet. The Queen answers:

I doubt it is no other than the main,  
His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage.  
(II.ii.56-57)

Among the several instances, Heilbrun uses to support her view of Gertrude; she cites the example in Act III when Gertrude first asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern if Hamlet

received them well, and if they were able to tempt him to any pastime. But before leaving the room, she stops for a word of kindness to Ophelia. Heilbrun states that "it is a humane gesture, for she is unwilling to leave Ophelia, the unhappy tool of the King and Polonius, without some kindly and intelligent appreciation of her help":

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish  
That your good beauties be the happy cause  
Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues  
Will bring him to his wonted way again,  
To both your honors.  
(III.i.38-42)

The play, indeed, provides the casual reader with the evidence of exonerating Gertrude of any guilt "Condemners" may charge against her. In the very important "Closet Scene", the pivotal scene which is considered one of the play's most crucial and fascinating moments as a great deal of action and information is provided in a relatively short span of time. The scene allows the audience to consider Gertrude's guilt with regard to King Hamlet's death, and it reintroduces the Ghost for the second and final time. Ultimately, the "closet scene" is significant because depending on the performance, the scene presents interpretive problems that impact the entire play. Questions about Hamlet's madness and Gertrude's guilt can be answered by it.

Still later, after the ghost has left, she tells Hamlet that he has "cleft [her] heart in twain," because her love for him equals her love for her new husband, so her loyalty is split between them. However, she does keep her word to Hamlet when Claudius questions her in the next Scene, not revealing to Hamlet's enemy that he is only pretending to be crazy, and also giving Hamlet a sense of remorse for Polonius' death in telling Claudius that "a weeps for what is done."

Gertrude does this both to protect her son and, like any good mother, to portray him in the best light possible. Gertrude is busy with other matters until Act V, when Hamlet scuffles with Laertes, and she shouts "Hamlet, Hamlet!" This shows her maternal reflex, where nothing really matters to her except that her son is misbehaving in public and, as his mother, she wishes to stop him and scold him. She also defends her son after the fight is over, begging her husband that "for love of God [he] forbear him." She is still trying to protect from harsh punishment, as any loving mother would. Son, Gertrude tries to make up for Hamlet's misbehavior by expressing to him her wish for Hamlet "to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes," in other words, to apologize to him. She wants her son to take responsibility for his actions and to learn to behave properly. During the final, fatal fencing match, Gertrude rejoices in Hamlet's thus-far success and offers him her napkin. She is happy at her son's victory and tries to take care of him physically, as any mother would. Finally, with her dying breath, Gertrude makes a sacrifice and warns Hamlet of the poisoned drink.

Even with regard to the notion of Gertrude's guilt established by the Ghost and Hamlet, some critics stress that this cannot be taken at face value. In general, many would

consider Gertrude to be guilty of not properly mourning her husband or of marrying Claudius. Gertrude, however, is considered guilty not by her own actions or words but by the words of two key characters, Hamlet and the Ghost. Between these two characters, readers receive an image of Gertrude that is sensuous and disloyal. Yet these two characters are what Richard Levin [31] calls "unreliable narrators" in his article, "Gertrude's Elusive Libido and Shakespeare's Unreliable Narrators." Levin explains that most of Shakespeare's characters tend to be reliable in that the audience can trust what they are saying and doing to be true. Levin writes, "... dramatic characters ... should be regarded as representations of real individuals who possess personalities and what we now call inferiority, which involves agendas, emotions, and even internal conflicts that can affect the reliability of the statements they make" .

Emily Graf, in "Gertrude's Role in *Hamlet*" [17], suggests that both Hamlet and the Ghost have reason to begrudge Gertrude, to portray her in an unfavorable light. Gertrude's guilt is not based on her own actions, words, or choices, but on the emotionally charged declarations of her late husband and her melancholic son.

In Act I, although the Ghost explains that the problem is "murder most foul" (I.v.33), his speech seems to focus more on the marriage of his widow, Gertrude, to his brother, Claudius. The Ghost tells Hamlet:

With witchcraft of his wits, with traitor gifts-  
 O wicked wit and gifts that have the power  
 So to seduce!-won to his shameful lust  
 The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.  
 O, Hamlet, what a falling-off was there  
 From me, whose love was of that dignity  
 That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
 I made to her in marriage, and to decline  
 Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor  
 To those of mine!  
 But virtue, as it never will be moved,  
 Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
 So lust, though to a radiant angel link' d,  
 Will sate itself in a celestial bed  
 And prey on garbage. (I.v.49-64)

Graf states that these sixteen lines seem much more important to the Ghost than his brief explanation of his own murder, which comes after this speech. If the focus were his murder, as he explains when he begins speaking to Hamlet, then why does he begin with Gertrude's grievances? The Ghost seems much more preoccupied with the loss of his position with Gertrude than with the loss of his position on the throne of Denmark. Richard Levin writes, "The Ghost's grievance obviously is Gertrude's adultery, and his agenda is ... to explain it in a way that will completely condemn her role and Claudius's and valorize his own ..." [31]. Instead of focusing on Claudius's murder, the Ghost focuses instead on Claudius' act of stealing King Hamlet's widow, Gertrude.

Within the same context, it is interesting to notice how Heilbrun challenges Bradley's own reading of the same text. Heilbrun [24] argues that:

"It is difficult to see in this speech, as Bradley apparently does, the gushing shallow wish of a sentimental woman that class distinctions shall not stand in the way of true love."

### 3. Conclusions

It is remarkable of Shakespeare, the playwright, how he could frame a character who could incite such controversy but with ample textual proof to support the particular point of view. Heilbrun uses the same examples to show Gertrude, if lustful, is also "intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech" [24].

Only in Shakespeare ever exists a character like Gertrude once exonerated by not showing any reaction in the play within the play episode yet is denied seeing or hearing the apparition of her former husband on grounds of her lack of purity; otherwise why should be barred from encountering it when it was spotted first by characters far remote from Hamlet the King than her such as Barnardo, Marcellus and Horatio.

Gertrude remains the Mona Lisa of Shakespeare sketched by a magnificent artist who created her, simultaneously, condemned and condoned.

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