

“Fragile” Women of Strength

-- An Analysis of Women's Image in Hamlet

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Abstract

This thesis studies the female images in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, taking Hamlet's lover Ophelia and Hamlet's mother Gertrude as examples to study the female images Shakespeare might want to show on the opposite side of vulnerability. This paper will focus on the analysis of what Ophelia and Gertrude have done, and the analysis of what Shakespeare did not clearly write out, that is, what these women are thinking when they take their actions, supplemented by the comparison between these two women and the protagonist Hamlet, to demonstrate the true image of women in *Hamlet*. Although Shakespeare declared, through the mouth of Hamlet, that women are fragile, the real fragility in this play is precisely embodied by the male, while the female is the symbol of the real sense of strength.

Keywords

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ophelia, Gertrude, Strong women.

1. Introduction

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most famous works, which tells the story of a Danish prince who intends to kill his uncle when he learns that his father has been deliberately killed by his uncle, who is now married to his mother. But in the process, after several rounds, Hamlet's hesitation directly or indirectly, leads to the death of many people, including his lover's father, his mother, his lover, and his lover's brother and other supporting roles directly or indirectly. And he, finally dies with his uncle. In this play, some of Hamlet's lines become classics in the history of drama, including the controversial line "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I, ii, 146). But does Shakespeare express his inner thoughts through the words of the main character? The answer is no, this line is more like a mirror hanging over the whole *Hamlet*, which reflects that the character who says this sentence is undoubtedly satirizing himself, running through the whole play, with a very distinct sense of irony. The following part will deeply analyze the real female image to expose the inner strength of two seemingly fragile women.

2. Ophelia: a Rebellious Maiden

Ophelia is the only maiden character in the play. Her three-dimensional image shows the absolute spirit of resistance, forming a strong contrast to the hesitant Hamlet. Ophelia dares to love or hate, or live or die. Every act of Ophelia is a counterattack to this complex and weak patriarchal society.

2.1. Ophelia's Apparent Submission

Ophelia, as Hamlet's lover, plays many roles in the play. As soon as Ophelia appears, she is talking to her father and her brother. In the conversation, Ophelia mentions Hamlet's love for her several times but all of these are dismissed by his father and his brother's lectures by repeatedly emphasizing the existence of class differences between her and Hamlet. Ophelia

verbally agrees to his father's and his brother's request that she must refuse Hamlet's love. Then Ophelia obeys her father's order to test whether Hamlet is pretending to be mad for Ophelia's love. Therefore, most readers believe that Ophelia is a submissive victim of the absolute patriarchal family system. In the whole process, Ophelia is indeed like an obedient lamb, who has no thoughts of her own and leaves her actions, thoughts, and even life to her father and brother.

But this is not the real case. At the very beginning, as for being forced to reject the love of Hamlet, this matter can be divided into two parts: Ophelia listens to her brother's advice and then receives her father's advice. If Ophelia is an obedient person who only obeys the patriarchal orders, she should have directly expresses her attitude of not associating with Hamlet after listening to her brother's words, instead of emphasizing Hamlet's love for her many times. This repeated emphasis is a small manifestation of Ophelia's deep sense of resistance. Not only that, Ophelia reveals directly to her father that Hamlet has come to her later. She describes Hamlet's behavior in detail, down to every movement and its frequency. It is a word of defiance against her father who thinks Hamlet doesn't truly love her.

It is clear that Ophelia tries in a gentle way to testify Hamlet's deep love for her, thus obtaining her father's sense of approval. It will be seen later that the imperceptible brainwashing of Ophelia makes her father fully believe in Hamlet's crazy love for her. Because of this, her father thinks that the reason for Hamlet's madness is Ophelia, thus Ophelia wins a chance to meet Hamlet formally.

2.2. Ophelia's Tolerance and Compassion

Under the urging of many forces, Ophelia finally meets Hamlet openly. Before their meeting, Hamlet utters his famous line, "To be, or not to be--that is the question" (III, I, 55) And then, after his soliloquy, Ophelia's heartbreaking journey is started since Ophelia soon discovers Hamlet's indifference, perceives Hamlet's change, and finally comes to the conclusion that Hamlet no longer loves her. Unlike the lonely and fragile image of Ophelia that some scholars take since they believe that Hamlet is her only spiritual support. Ophelia is very conscious of the change in Hamlet's emotions and makes a swift break afterwards. Her dependence on Hamlet is broken in this scene[2]. In the face of Hamlet who is in a high position in the patriarchal system, she makes no secret of complaining that she has been cheated. Not only that, Ophelia interrupts Hamlet several times in their dialogue. Her interruptions represent her as a character who is more equal in power to Hamlet and who is the master of her own judgment[3]. This is a further indication of her independence and her resilience as a woman.

Hamlet's meeting with Ophelia is replete with his accusations against her. Ophelia shows infinite tolerance towards Hamlet's repeated accusations, which means that she is at this moment in the second stage of development of the ethic of care -- goodness is self-sacrifice[4]. And although she feels angry and sad in the face of her lover's betrayal of her love, she still prays to God and hopes that her lover will get better, which again is a unique kind of tenderness and compassion of Ophelia as a woman.

After this dialogue, Ophelia and Hamlet also have some conversations, but all exist in the interval of politeness and alienation. Ophelia chooses respect, prayer and decisive separation from her former lover. Ophelia is decent, rational, and mature in dealing with the relationship between love and complaint, which shows her maturity and loveliness. Women's devotion and indulgence in love, as well as their tolerance, distance and wishes for their former lovers, are what Ophelia best embodies as a microcosm.

2.3. Ophelia's Suicide

After learning that her father was killed by her former lover, Ophelia falls into madness and finally dies on the way to pick a wreath. Shakespeare said only a few words about Ophelia's

death, saying that while climbing a tree to pick a wreath, she accidentally falls into the water and gets drowned. Many people believe that Ophelia's long abnormal monologue before her death is sensible enough to pave the way for this strange way of death. There is distinct evidence in two minor characters' dialogue:

"It must be 'se offendendo;' it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act: and an act hath three branches: it is, to act, to do, to perform: argal, she drowned herself wittingly." (V., I., 9)

From this, it is obvious that the real death of Ophelia that Shakespeare wanted to write is actually suicide. Christians are not allowed to commit suicide, not to mention how strict and formal Christian education Ophelia receives as a daughter of a minister. Not being able to commit suicide should be engraved in her bones and blood, but she still chooses to commit suicide. With this dark and grand rebellion as Ophelia's final ending, it is enough to show her courage and determination to be herself. The death of Ophelia at the end is in sharp contrast to Hamlet's hesitation about death. Hamlet's hesitation and talkativeness come from his fear of an unknown death. But for Ophelia, it is just a choice, so she does it with calmness and determination. This shows that the vulnerable one is not woman but someone who complains about women's fragile behavior and causes so many people's death.

If Portia's cleverness is a rebellion against the social rules of Elizabethan times[5], then Ophelia's rebellion is more radical, a rebellion against the faith of her own beliefs. This once again proves Ophelia's inner grit.

3. Gertrude: a Strong Mother

Gertrude's part in the play, as the mother of the main character Hamlet, is very small. The main character Hamlet's "Frailty, thy name is woman" is an exclamation after he talks to Gertrude. Gertrude doesn't have much of a part in the play, but it cannot cover her resilience. She has always protected Hamlet in her own way, like at the beginning marrying the new king, keeping Hamlet's secret that he is still sober, or at the end by drinking the poisoned wine for Hamlet. These can show her intelligence, thoughtfulness and bravery. As the scholar Chen Juan said, Hamlet has an Oedipus complex, and the tragedy of his mother Gertrude is inevitable[6]. This is the result of the collision between Hamlet's Oedipus complex and morality, but even so, it is still undeniable that Hamlet's curse seems so feeble in front of Gertrude's plump maternal and female image.

3.1. Gertrude's Unwilling Marriage

As the conflict between the new king and Hamlet intensifies, Gertrude and Hamlet have a conversation. After killing Polonius, Hamlet is confronted with Gertrude's assertion of the cruelty of his actions, a cruelty he bluntly refers to as being as vicious as killing a king and then marrying his brother. Gertrude's reaction is the words repeated from her lips -- "As kill a king" (III., iv., 28). At this moment Gertrude's surprise comes from the fact that Hamlet also knows the truth of the old king's death. And then Hamlet accuses her of being with her uncle all for the sake of lowly lust. She, in turn, replies that Hamlet has recognized the stain on her soul. If Gertrude's marriage with the new king has been for love, she would not have seen it as a stain on her soul. It is clear that Gertrude has no love for the new king, but has no choice but to be married. This is the most reasonable way in which the seemingly weak Gertrude could have reacted to the cruel reality. The old king dies while Gertrude's own son Hamlet is still abroad, and at the same time Gertrude knows deep down that the queen is still queen if she is the king's wife. So she marries the new king, in order to safeguard herself as still queen, and only then

could she safeguard herself and Hamlet. This is also evident from the fact that she promises Hamlet to keep the secret that he is not mad. Gertrude's marriage to the new king is a sacrifice made by a brave woman with her love.

Lady Macbeth, who also ascends to the Queen's throne, abandons her kindness to stimulate Macbeth's castration anxiety by questioning the purity of male identity, thereby achieving the goal of swaying Macbeth's actions[7]. Unlike her, Gertrude fully demonstrates her traditional feminine traits of innate gentleness and compassion. She is soft, but she tries her best to protect the people she cares about in the gentlest way. Her softness leads her to choose the way of least conflict and least sacrifice, making a sacrifice with her marriage. This is something that requires greater courage than fierce resistance. This is why some scholars believe that the values traditionally associated with women are also considered morally superior to those traditionally associated with men[8]. Gertrude demonstrates that traditional femininity has its own greatness.

3.2. Gertrude's Final Sacrifice

Another dramatic story about Gertrude is the poisoned wine she drinks for Hamlet. The cup of poisoned wine is intended for Hamlet by the new king, but she drinks it without hesitation. She is not ignorant of the matter. When the new king dissuades her from drinking, she says, "I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me"(V., ii., 274)When Hamlet hesitates in the face of death, Gertrude chooses to die without hesitation in order to protect her son. This is undoubtedly a great and brave performance.

As Hamlet is still hesitating between "to be" and "not to be", hesitating in the face of what should be the decisive revenge, Gertrude has fully implemented her tenacity as a mother. In response to the poisoned wine that the new king has been urging Hamlet to drink, Gertrude chooses the most radical way -- sacrificing her own life. The wise Gertrude understands that merely keeping Hamlet away from the poisoned wine would not be convincing enough to save Hamlet's life. So the great mother steps forward with determination and sacrifices her own life to put a brief halt to the new king's machinations. Perhaps she understands that there is a limit to what she could do, but the strength of motherhood urges her to do the last thing she could do.

4. Conclusion

Ophelia and Gertrude, the two female characters in *Hamlet* show their strong will without a doubt by their willing choice to die. They are bound in this patriarchal society and could not move too far, but they maintain their love in their hearts with what they could only control and complete the great rebellion against this cold, selfish and weak patriarchal society. Their indifference and determination to death do not show contempt for the indecisive Hamlet. All the actions they have taken are resolute counterattacks to "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I., ii., 146) This is what Shakespeare really wanted to write about women-- always being themselves, always being strong, brave and empathetic.

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