

Feminine Authority in a Masculine Age: Gertrude and Elizabeth I Reconsidered

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Abstract: This paper reconsiders the negotiation of female agency in a deeply patriarchal society. By comparing Queen Elizabeth I's political mastery with the literary character of Gertrude in Shakespeare's Hamlet, this study demonstrates how early modern women transcended traditional gender constraints to assert profound authority.

Key Words: Feminism, Authority, Elizabeth I, Masculine, age

1. Introduction

In the course of the last decades of the 20th century, feminism gained wider academic and social recognition in the late twentieth century. The concept of feminism is not only of importance for a secluded group of females, but for every member of society that believes in gender equality and equal rights for women and men. Even people who are not involved in feminist issues have to acknowledge that women have been disadvantaged to men in many areas, which is why the feminist movement's aim to improve the social position of women does not need any justification [3]. Moreover, finding a final and unifying definition for feminism has become difficult since the term itself has nowadays many different meanings and is also often ideologically charged. It only becomes obvious how many layers the term has when one tries to analyze all different approaches of feminism [4]. De Clercq explains that feminism is applied to everything that aims to improve women's social conditions. The many different approaches, which are not always in one line, but which are sometimes even opposed, make defining the term difficult. Additionally, the term is even put at risk of becoming redundant because it is so all-embracing and applies to too many different concepts [3].

1.1 The Elizabethan Context and Female Power

Gertrude is usually described as a very sexual woman who quickly marries her dead husband's brother because she cannot control her desires. This interpretation has been widely accepted for a long time and has not changed much across different time periods or critical approaches.

What is strange about this view is that modern readers do not fully understand the social and political rules of Shakespeare's time, which influenced how Gertrude's actions were judged when the play was written. Even without this historical knowledge, readers still accept and support this negative view of her character.

While this interpretation of Gertrude is common and often shown in movies and stage performances, we will see that Gertrude is more than just her sexual behavior. By using critical sources and closely reading *Hamlet*, this study will prove that Gertrude is an independent woman who can make her own choices, even though the men around her judge her harshly. Instead of marrying Claudius because she lacks self-control, Gertrude marries him to protect her son, Hamlet, from Claudius—the man who killed her first husband, the King of Denmark.

This study starts by analyzing Gertrude in *Hamlet* by discussing a woman who influenced Shakespeare's creation of strong female characters. This woman is Queen Elizabeth I. As a female ruler in the male-dominated society of sixteenth-century England, Elizabeth had a strong influence on many writers and playwrights, not only Shakespeare. Shakespeare's effort to understand how a powerful woman could exist in a patriarchal society helps explain the creation of characters like Gertrude.

Gertrude is often seen as guilty with the actual laws and rules of Shakespeare's time that were used to judge her actions. Understanding the social and political expectations of that period is important for readers to fully understand why Gertrude was considered guilty. Finally, through a close reading of *Hamlet*, this study will show that Gertrude is an independent and moral character who can make her own choices and who ultimately dies while trying to protect her son.

1.2 Queen Elizabeth I: A Model of Female Authority

Queen Elizabeth I is often seen as one of the most important rulers in British history, especially because she ruled as a woman in a male-dominated society. During a time when women were not expected to hold power, Elizabeth had to balance calming the fears of her people while still showing strong authority. As Louis Montrose, a literary scholar, explains that a ruler must understand the worries and concerns of the people to control them successfully [8]. Elizabeth had to recognize these fears early and manage them before they caused problems.

Elizabeth's role is important when studying Shakespeare's female characters

because she served as a real-life example of a powerful woman. Shakespeare could use Elizabeth as a model when creating strong female figures like Gertrude. Montrose also explains that the relationships between characters in Shakespeare's plays are shaped by social ideas about gender, family, age, and class [8]. Shakespeare based his characters on the world around him and on his own experiences, so it makes sense to consider Queen Elizabeth when trying to understand Gertrude.

First, it is important to understand the general beliefs about women during the Elizabethan period. According to literary scholar Lisa Jardine, Aristotle was still considered the main authority on science and human nature during this time, even though he lived many centuries earlier. Jardine explains that Aristotle described women as weaker and more emotional than men. He claimed that women were softer, more impulsive, more emotional, and less hopeful than men, and that they were more likely to cry, complain, or deceive others [5]. Aristotle believed that men and women were naturally different not only physically, but also emotionally and mentally.

Although it is unclear what evidence Aristotle used to support these claims, many of his ideas sound like stereotypes about men and women that still exist today. The difference is that modern readers usually understand these ideas as opinions rather than proven scientific facts based on real research.

Even though Queen Elizabeth I was unusual for her time because she ruled as a powerful woman, she did not believe that women were equal to men. As Louis Montrose explains, nearly all forms of public and private authority in Elizabethan England were held by men, such as fathers, husbands, teachers, and political leaders [8]. The only major exception was Elizabeth herself as queen, which naturally created tension in society.

Some might expect that Elizabeth would have supported women's rights more strongly, since she was able to rule successfully for many years. However, Elizabeth was more focused on keeping order and tradition than on changing the system. She understood that people were already nervous about being ruled by a woman, so she avoided making large changes that could increase those fears. Instead, she chose roles that allowed her to exercise power without challenging social norms too directly.

One example of this was her control over marriage arrangements at court. As Montrose explains, Elizabeth kept the traditional paternal power to approve or reject marriages, especially young nobles [8]. Although this power was usually held by fathers, Elizabeth chose to control it herself. This gave her strong influence over the men and women at court, since marriage decisions were extremely important and could affect a family's future. Young women were careful not to

offend her.

Despite holding this paternal authority, Elizabeth avoided taking on roles that were considered too masculine and did not support female advancement beyond her own position. As Jardine notes, Elizabeth never promoted women to important political positions, except for traditional roles such as ladies-in-waiting [5]. Even other royal women were not considered for positions of real power. This shows that Elizabeth's public policies did not clearly promote broader female advancement.

Instead of encouraging women's equality, Elizabeth separated herself from other women and emphasized her unique status as a ruler chosen by God. Jardine argues that this behavior shows how uncomfortable Elizabethan society was with female power. People looked to past literature and symbols to justify Elizabeth's authority despite her gender [5]. Elizabeth presented herself as having the mind and strength of a king, not as an ordinary woman. This image is especially clear in her official portraits, which will be discussed later. As seen throughout her reign, Elizabeth carefully anticipated her people's fears and addressed them before they became serious problems.

1.3 Shaping the Public Image

Rather than focusing on proving that a woman could successfully hold great political power, Queen Elizabeth I relied on strong symbols and images to shape how her people saw her. In many ways, Elizabeth carefully managed her public image so that she could gain love and popularity while keeping authority and respect. One of the most important ways she presented herself was as a symbol of chastity and female virtue. This image was especially important because Elizabeth never married.

As Lisa Jardine explains, Elizabeth used the idea of chastity to distract attention from her gender. While Elizabethan culture promoted negative ideas about women, it also celebrated images of female virtue that were so powerful they took attention away from the fact that the ruler was a woman [5]. Elizabeth often compared herself to famous female figures from ancient myths and legends. These figures were well known to her people, which made symbolism easy to understand and accept. According to Jardine, the main image associated with Elizabeth became Chastity, but she was also described as figures such as Pandora, Gloriana, Cynthia, Belphoebe, and Astraea throughout her reign [5]. These images helped Elizabeth appear less threatening in a society that was uncomfortable with female rule.

Living in a strongly patriarchal society, many Elizabethans struggled to accept a woman as their ruler. Elizabeth understood these fears and responded to them by shaping her image in ways her people could understand. Her use of symbolism was also connected to religious changes happening at the time. During the reign of

Henry VIII, England broke away from Catholicism, which led to the removal of the worship of the Virgin Mary. As Louis Montrose explains, Protestantism removed an important spiritual figure that represented motherhood and comfort, leaving a gap in English religious life [8].

Elizabeth recognized this loss and presented herself as a chaste, almost maternal figure, a symbolic mother to the nation. By doing this, she replaced the spiritual role once held by the Virgin Mary. As Montrose concludes, Elizabeth's rule was not meant to challenge male dominance in society. Instead, by emphasizing how different she was from other women, she may have strengthened male authority [8].

Through these symbols and images, Elizabeth created a secure place for herself in the minds of her people. Rather than allowing doubt about her ability to rule, she addressed their fears by presenting herself in familiar and comforting ways. This helped her people understand her reign and accept her authority within an already existing patriarchal system.

1.4 The Concept of the “Two Bodies”

Queen Elizabeth did not always represent herself only through images of chastity and female virtue. Another well-known idea she used was the belief that she had two bodies. Her physical body was female, but her political or mental body—the one she used to rule—was masculine. Elizabeth often spoke about the weakness of her natural female body while also reminding her audience that her political body was strong, king-like, and given to her by God and her royal family.

The best illustration of this is Elizabeth's famous speech at Tilbury, addressed to soldiers preparing to defend England from the Spanish Armada. Elizabeth admitted freely that she had the body of a weak woman but claimed to have the heart and strength of a king of England as Louis Montrose explains [8]. With this, Elizabeth asked her people to see past her female appearance and trust her inner strength and leadership. She also supported the idea of divine right by saying that her power was from God. This put her above the ordinary people and legitimized her rule.

1.5 The portrayal of power in art

Elizabeth's image mattered so much to her authority that her portraits were also significant in influencing her image. The Armada Portrait is one of the most famous portraits. The Armada Portrait was painted around 1588. There are still three versions of this painting. All show Elizabeth in rich dress, surrounded by meaningful symbols. The bow tied near Elizabeth's dress represents her chastity while the pearls around her neck are symbols of both England's wealth and Elizabeth's purity in this portrait. These symbols strongly emphasize both that Elizabeth is unmarried and virtuous. The golden mermaid statue (figurehead) on the right side of the portrait also suggests that Elizabeth still has beauty and charm,

and reminds viewers that she is attractive even while remaining chaste.

Another important detail is the imperial crown is placed to the left of Elizabeth (not on her head) which may reflect her knowledge that some people felt uncomfortable with a woman wearing the crown. By placing it beside her she suggests authority without directly challenging traditional expectations.

Finally, the globe that Elizabeth holds is a big symbol. Her fingers rest on the Americas, a sign of England's growing interest in exploration and colonization during this time. This detail shows England's wish to be a global power, especially in the New World. Together, these symbols demonstrate the care with which Elizabeth curated her image, and how she utilized visual representation to reinforce her authority as queen.

1.6 The legacy of Elizabeth's reign and its literary influence

Queen Elizabeth's self-presentation is interesting, but the key question is whether it was successful. Did her people really buy a woman running a patriarchal society? Historical evidence shows they were. To a large extent Elizabeth was able to ease her subjects' fears and win their acceptance. For example, a French ambassador, Andre Hurault, was allowed to sketch Elizabeth when she was about 63-64 years old. Louis Montrose has noted that the ambassador writes of Elizabeth's concern for her image in the eyes of others, but he also demonstrates how her image deeply affected him [8]. This shows how the meticulous management Elizabeth exercised over her appearance had a lasting impact on those who saw her.

Other evidence also suggests that Elizabeth's people accepted her symbolic role. One writer called her "our dear Queen," a royal godmother, and the "natural mother" of the state [8]. This description corresponds directly to the image of Elizabeth as a chaste and maternal figure, as the Virgin Mary. Elizabeth was loved and feared simultaneously. According to Sir John Harington, people loved her, but also feared her enough to respect her authority. Montrose explains that Elizabeth employed images that were at once potent and recognizable to reassure her male subjects, but also to enhance her domination over them [8].

2. Re-examining the traditional view of Gertrude

"Shakespeare was one of those who was influenced by the powerful imagery of Elizabeth," Jardine says. I share this opinion, arguing that Shakespeare was influenced by the culture and politics of his time. More specifically, Elizabeth's iconography was formative for how Shakespeare imagined and portrayed powerful women in his plays. This is why it is important to know how Elizabeth presented herself as a queen in order to understand the way Shakespeare portrayed female characters, especially Gertrude in Hamlet.

Like Queen Elizabeth, Gertrude is also a queen in a patriarchal society. Elizabeth's knowledge of herself and her careful construction of her public image allowed him

to create a female character with power as the queen of Denmark. But Elizabeth would seem to possess a power to influence and control those about her which Gertrude does not appear to have. Indeed, Gertrude lacks many of the qualities and strategies employed by Elizabeth to buttress her authority. It is possible that Shakespeare lived under Elizabeth's rule and that this inspired him to think about what it meant for a woman to have power. But in Hamlet, Shakespeare lets Gertrude be overshadowed by the men around her, especially Claudius and Hamlet. Gertrude is often portrayed as passive, and often spoken for or judged by male characters. +++ We will discuss Gertrude's lack of control later, but this may reflect Shakespeare's understanding of the limits placed on women at this time. Elizabeth was loved and respected as queen but she distanced herself from other women to be in power. This limitation is shown by Gertrude's comparison with Elizabeth. Gertrude does not rebel against traditional female roles as Elizabeth does, and thus she possesses far less power and authority within the world of the play. Although she does not have much to say in Hamlet, Gertrude has garnered much scholarship and controversy. But I maintain that this sexualized mother portrayal of Gertrude is not only inaccurate, but exaggerated. Janet Adelman writes that Gertrude is "Preeminently mother like others, the intimate unknown figure around whom...fantasies swirl" [1]. Gertrude appears to witness the events as they happen, but she is often the subject of other characters' discussions, which affects the audience's view of her. Hamlet's focus is on his relationship with his mother, and this has been the subject of much scholarly attention.

Adelman argues that Gertrude remains ambiguously innocent, but she is central to the play's imagery and fantasy [1].

2.1 Legal Frameworks and the "Lustful Widow" Stereotype

Many critics read Gertrude as a sensual woman who lacks the qualities expected of a proper wife or mother. Even though she does not appear to play a role in King Hamlet's death, she is often blamed for Denmark's problems. This interpretation is so widespread that it is rarely questioned. Gertrude's supposed guilt is based largely on her marriage to Claudius, because at that time it was illegal for a woman to marry her deceased husband's brother. Lisa Jardine explains that blame for the marriage was often passed to Gertrude as if she were the instigator [5].

Jardine also emphasizes that the issue is not how Gertrude is portrayed in the play, but how audiences have interpreted her. In the past, blaming her for marrying Claudius made sense according to cultural and legal norms. Today, however, those norms no longer exist, yet modern readers still tend to accept Gertrude's guilt [5]. In other words, while cultural ideas about women have changed in the past 400 years, Gertrude continues to be judged unfairly.

Gertrude's supposed guilt is based largely on her marriage to Claudius, but to

understand the legal gravity of her actions we must look at the specific laws of the time. The legal and religious frameworks governing marriage in early modern England were grounded in canon law traditions that strictly prohibited incestuous unions, including those formed through affinity as well as blood. As codified in sources such as Gratian's *Decretum* and later reinforced in the (The Book of Common Prayer 1662,), a widow's marriage to her deceased husband's brother fell within the prohibited degrees of kinship and was therefore regarded as both unlawful and morally transgressive. Within this framework, the union between Gertrude and Claudius in *Hamlet* would have been perceived by a contemporary audience as explicitly incestuous.

This perception is directly articulated in the play itself. Hamlet condemns the marriage as "O most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" [9], explicitly invoking the language of incest to describe his mother's remarriage. The term "incestuous" here is not merely rhetorical exaggeration but reflects the legal and theological

definitions current in Elizabethan England. Similarly, the Ghost of King Hamlet reinforces this judgment when he describes Claudius as having won Gertrude "with witchcraft of his wit... to seduce... my most seeming-virtuous queen" [9], framing the marriage as both morally corrupt and illicit.

As Stephen Greenblatt notes, the play's emotional intensity is deeply tied to early modern anxieties about sin and the violation of sacred social boundaries. These anxieties were not abstract: as Martin Ingram demonstrates, ecclesiastical courts actively prosecuted marriages within prohibited degrees, treating them as serious moral and legal offenses. Hamlet's revulsion must therefore be understood not simply as personal outrage but as a culturally reinforced response grounded in legal doctrine [11].

Furthermore, Gertrude's sexuality is framed within the stereotype of the "lustful widow," a figure shaped by both legal restriction and patriarchal ideology. Hamlet's bitter accusation—"Frailty, thy name is woman!"—links his mother's remarriage to a broader condemnation of female weakness and uncontrolled desire. Critics such as Lisa Jardine and Jonathan Dollimore argue that such representations reflect a cultural tendency to regulate and stigmatize female sexuality, particularly when it transgressed established legal norms [9].

In this context, Gertrude's marriage operates at the intersection of law, religion, and gender ideology. The repeated emphasis on incest within the play is not incidental but grounded in a specific legal reality familiar to Shakespeare's audience. Thus, the language of *Hamlet* itself reinforces the authority of ecclesiastical law, transforming Gertrude's remarriage into a powerful symbol of moral disorder and social transgression.

2.2 The Bias of Unreliable Narrators: Hamlet and the Ghost

Many people assume that Gertrude is guilty of not properly mourning her husband or marrying Claudius. However, I argue that her perceived guilt comes not from her own actions or words, but from how two key characters, Hamlet and the Ghost describe her. These characters present Gertrude as sensual and disloyal, but as Richard Levin points out in “Gertrude’s Elusive Libido and Shakespeare’s Unreliable Narrators,” both Hamlet and the Ghost are “unreliable narrators”. Levin explains that most characters in Shakespeare are generally trustworthy, but their statements can be influenced by personal agendas, emotions, and internal conflicts (312). In other words, characters are written as real people, with feelings and biases that affect what they say. Shakespeare usually signals to the audience when a character’s words should not be taken at face value, but he does not always make these signals obvious [6].

In the case of Hamlet, both Hamlet and the Ghost have reasons to portray Gertrude negatively, and their personal biases shape the audience’s perception of her. The Ghost first appears to the guards, who recognize him as King Hamlet, and then speaks directly to Hamlet. While the Ghost claims that Hamlet’s task is to seek revenge for his murder [9], he spends much of his speech criticizing Gertrude for marrying Claudius. The Ghost describes her as having been seduced by Claudius, but he frames her as morally compromised:

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 [9].

Even though the Ghost says Claudius did the wooing, he still blames Gertrude for “sitting in a celestial bed” with Claudius instead of remaining faithful to King Hamlet. Levin notes that the Ghost’s account is influenced by his own agenda: it makes him look noble while casting Gertrude and Claudius in the worst possible light [6].

Even though the Ghost tells Hamlet not to blame Gertrude for Claudius’ rise to power, Hamlet ignores this advice and focuses almost entirely on his mother’s behavior. For example, when Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius while he is praying, he instead goes to Gertrude’s chamber to lecture her on what he believes are her misdeeds. This famous closet scene is often cited by critics trying to

understand Gertrude's character or her relationship with Hamlet. The scene shows Hamlet's personal grudge against his mother, which makes him an unreliable narrator.

During the closet scene, Hamlet criticizes Gertrude for being too old to feel desire, saying

If thou canst murine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. [9].

Although Hamlet may have agreed to the Ghost's command earlier, he cannot resist blaming Gertrude for what he sees as her moral failings. Levin explains that the Ghost is concerned with Gertrude's disloyalty to him and his "celestial" love, whereas Hamlet's complaint focuses on her "lust" despite her age (2008, 312). Hamlet shifts blame from Claudius to Gertrude, treating her as the source of corruption rather than Claudius, even going so far as to say, "A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother" [9]. As Janet Adelman notes, Hamlet turns Claudius into a passive figure while making Gertrude the "Active murderer" in his accusations [1].

Throughout the play, Gertrude's character is shaped less by her own words than by the men around her, especially Hamlet and the Ghost. According to these narrators, Gertrude is guilty—either of being seduced by Claudius or of shaming her husband and family through her actions. But both Hamlet and the Ghost are unreliable. Levin writes that neither account can be considered objective because they come from people who feel personally wronged, each promoting a version of events that serves their own agenda [6]. Once the audience recognizes the unreliability of these narrators, they must decide for themselves what Gertrude's character and guilt truly are.

2.3 Gertrude's Guilt under Elizabethan Social and Legal Contexts

Despite this, many readers and audiences continue to accept the biased perspectives of Hamlet and the Ghost. Abigail Montgomery observes that modern critics often reduce Gertrude to her sexuality and her marriage to Claudius, rather than viewing her as a full character [7]. Instead of relying on these untrustworthy narrators, we should consider Gertrude as an independent individual capable of making her own decisions. To fully understand her, however, we first need to compare how she has been interpreted with what she was guilty of according to the social and political expectations of her time.

So far, Gertrude is often seen as guilty because of the biased perspectives of Hamlet and the Ghost, and because directors and actresses frequently emphasize her sexuality over other traits. Now, it is important to consider what Gertrude is actually guilty of according to the social and legal expectations of her time,

including social etiquette, inheritance laws, and marriage rules.

In Elizabethan, England, social etiquette was very strict. Books of manners outlined how people, especially women, were expected to behave. As a widow, Gertrude was expected to mourn King Hamlet for a long period. However, she stops wearing mourning clothes less than two months after his death, which offends Hamlet, who continues to wear black to honor his father while the rest of the court follows Gertrude's lead. Lisa Jardine explains that Hamlet's prolonged mourning visually reinforces the memory of King Hamlet, making Gertrude's quick return to normal life seem inappropriate (Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, 43). By contrast, Claudius reminds Hamlet that his grief is excessive and "unmanly" [9]. Normally, Gertrude would be considered guilty of breaking social conventions, but because Claudius and the court have set aside mourning etiquette; she seems to act within the accepted norms.

2.4 Legal Complexities: Inheritance and Incestuous Marriage

Gertrude is also guilty in a more serious way: she potentially threatens Hamlet's inheritance of the Danish throne. Hamlet expresses his outrage at this legal and moral haste, exclaiming: 'O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!' [9]. It is this 'speed' that Lisa Jardine describes as the heart of the problem, it is not only about emotion but about the 'power to disrupt the patriarchal power structure'. Marrying quickly obliterated the memory of the dead king, and strengthened Claudius's hold on the throne before any challenge to the inheritance could be made.

Inheritance laws in the sixteenth century were complicated. Under the rules, this land or titles could be entailed to the oldest male (tail male), or oldest child (tail general), of the estate. Gertrude marries Claudius and as a result, Hamlet may not be the next on the throne. Claudius may be or Claudius and Gertrude's children, if any [5]. This is why Hamlet is so concerned about Gertrude's sexuality: her marriage to Claudius gives her influence over the succession.

A mother's duty at that time was to be a passive guardian of her child's legacy. Therefore, by marrying Claudius, Gertrude transfers her allegiance to her new husband and his potential heirs, thereby undermining Hamlet's claim. Noel Blincoe observes that Hamlet's anger and frustration are partly due to his mother's ignoring him after King Hamlet's death (Blincoe, *Is Gertrude an Adulteress?* [2]. Gertrude's act of replacing King Hamlet with Claudius not only threatens Hamlet's place in the line of succession; Jardine explains that even if Gertrude does not know of Claudius's intentions, she is still "guilty by virtue of her power to disrupt the patriarchal power structure" [5].

In short, while Gertrude may not be guilty of adultery or moral corruption as Hamlet and the Ghost claim, she does hold real power over the throne by virtue of

her marriage. Her actions provide her with an opportunity to influence Hamlet's inheritance and thus help to make sense of his rage and obsession with her sexuality in the social and legal context of the time.

Also, one must take into account the laws of marriage in Elizabethan England to understand Gertrude's actions. A famous historical example is Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon who had been married to his deceased brother Arthur. Lisa Jardine says that this marriage was thought to be "incestuous under the Levitical tables of affinity" [5]. In Elizabethan times the rules about who could marry whom were strict. And "incestuous" included marriages to close relatives like a brother-in-law, not just siblings or cousins. Similarly, Gertrude technically broke canon law when she married Claudius, her brother-in-law, making their union forbidden and "incestuous" [9]. Most of the characters in Hamlet don't comment on Gertrude's marriage, unlike the marriage of Henry VIII, probably because they don't want to offend the new king. Yet Gertrude would be guilty under the laws of the time.

Gertrude could be guilty in terms of social etiquette and the laws of the time. First, she does not observe proper mourning customs, discarding her black mourning clothes and remarrying less than two months after King Hamlet's death. Secondly, her marriage to Claudius may disrupt the line of succession, which would also pose a threat to Hamlet's claim to the throne, as any child born to Gertrude and Claudius would have the immediate claim. Finally, Gertrude's marriage is incestuous according to Elizabethan Canon law. These points help to explain Hamlet and the Ghost's anger at her actions.

Gertrude was having an affair with Claudius before King Hamlet's death, some critics have suggested, but there is no evidence for this in the play. What can be supported by evidence is clearer to focus on instead. It is interesting that Gertrude is blamed more than Claudius for her choices even though Claudius was the instigator of these events. As Jardine notes, "the moral blame is placed on the civically non-participating Gertrude, and the civil complexity of kin and inheritance obligations, under which Hamlet might claim a grievance, is refocused." Legally and socially Hamlet's rage should have been directed at Claudius, but instead it is almost wholly directed at Gertrude. Even by Elizabethan standards of guilt, Hamlet's fixation on his mother rather than Claudius seems extreme [5].

3. Gertrude's Moral Agency and Final Autonomy: Re-assessing Gertrude's Speech and Silence:

In light of the historical context and traditional interpretations, Gertrude should be seen as an independent moral agent rather than in terms of her sexuality or her relationships with the male characters around her. Although critics have frequently

concentrated on her marriage to Claudius or her relationship with Hamlet, Gertrude has her own moral and interpretive agency. As Richard Levin points out: Many male critics are willing to accept the accusations of the Ghost and Hamlet about the lust of Gertrude, “she herself never gives us any sign of it” [6]. She is a character that is often misunderstood because she is not heard, but she is autonomous and ethical in her reasoning of her actions. Abigail Montgomery writes that understanding Gertrude means looking at her own choices and actions, not the opinions of others [7].

One of the most famous lines, “The lady doth protest too much, me thinks”, usually taken as a comment on Gertrude’s supposed duplicity, can be read another way. Gertrude’s line in the Player Queen’s play-with-a-play suggests an awareness that one cannot always keep previous promises in unexpected situations. She may have pledged her fidelity to King Hamlet, but the murder of Claudius put her in a situation out of her hands. Her words express understanding and moral reasoning, not merely an admission of guilt or lust [9].

3.1 Transformation in the closet scene

The closet scene also displays Gertrude’s agency. Critics like Lisa Jardine have argued that Gertrude is in league with Claudius and Polonius against Hamlet, but her invitation shows that she knows her privacy has already been breached. Gertrude speaks to Hamlet in a controlled and morally responsible manner, expressing regret for her actions, yet also being part of Hamlet’s revenge plot by tricking Claudius [7]. This scene portrays her as an independent actor who can make ethical decisions balancing the loyalty to her son, negotiating her complex situation.

3.2 Narrative Authority: The Death of Ophelia:

Furthermore, Gertrude’s narrative function in the play is most evident in her telling of Ophelia’s death. She converts a potentially scandalous suicide into a poetic accident, using what might be called ‘narrative authority’ to save Ophelia’s reputation. With vivid, lyrical detail she paints the scene:

'A willow leans across a stream / That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy water;
/ There with fantastic garlands did she come... / Her clothes spread wide, / And
mermaid-like a space they held her up' [9].

She mediates grief for Laertes and Demonstrating responsibility and narrative control by framing Ophelia’s death as an accident, not suicide [7]. Shakespeare gives Gertrude, not Hamlet or the Ghost, the task of telling what happened and lets her do it reliably, showing that she is an independent and trustworthy character.

3.3 The Final Act of Autonomy: The End Scene

The last scene is the realization of her autonomy. She takes the poisoned cup of her own free will, putting Hamlet’s safety before the orders of Claudius. But she is

adamant: Despite the King's clear warning:

I will, my lord; I pray you, pardon me [9].

Having both moral agency and courage [7]. In death she still takes command, revealing Claudius's betrayal, crying out with her dying breath:

'No, no, the drink, the drink! / O my dear Hamlet! / The drink, the drink! I am poisoned' [9].

She makes sure justice is heard in this way, from a silenced queen to the ultimate witness of the truth.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has argued that Gertrude is not merely a sensuous widow or a passive figure manipulated by men, she is an independent moral being capable of choice, interpretation and responsibility. Throughout the play and especially in the closet scene and her final moments, she asserts her autonomy, revealing herself as a fully realized character whose moral and narrative authority is frequently overlooked.

The character of Gertrude has been misinterpreted many times throughout the centuries. This is because of the biased view of Hamlet and the Ghost and the strict legal and social systems of the Elizabethan period. But, through her analysis of the laws of history and the textual evidence of her final sacrifice, she is presented as a contemplative and ethical agent, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Gertrude deserves this new interpretation, after four centuries of misrepresentation, an interpretation that acknowledges her independence, her judgement and her crucial importance in Hamlet. At last she is 'unbound' from the labels of the past; she is a testament to the quiet but profound power of female agency.

Finally, reading Gertrude in Hamlet as Queen Elizabeth I reveals a complex interplay with, and subversion of, traditional gender roles in Elizabethan England. They were the most powerful in their fields, but their power was exercised in very different – and often opposing.

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السلطة الأنثوية في العصر الذكوري : دراسة حالة في شخصيتي جيرترود وإليزابيث الأولى

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المخلص : تُعنى هذه الدراسة البحثية النظر في مسألة تمكين المرأة في مجتمع أبوي متجذر. ومن خلال مقارنة براعة الملكة إليزابيث الأولى السياسية بشخصية جيرترود الأدبية في مسرحية هاملت لشكسبير، تُبين هذه الدراسة كيف تجاوزت نساء العصر الحديث المبكر القيود الجندرية التقليدية ليُرسخن سلطة عميقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الأنثوية ، السلطة، إليزابيث الأولى، الذكوري، العصر