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The Character of Hamlet’s Mother

CAROLYN HEILBRUN

The character of Hamlet’s mother has not received the specific critical attention it deserves. Moreover, the traditional account of her personality as rendered by the critics will not stand up under close scrutiny of Shakespeare’s play.

None of the critics of course has failed 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. Indeed, Freud and Jones see her, the object of Hamlet’s Oedipus complex, as central to the motivation of the play.¹ But the critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet’s word “fraility” 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).

The critics are agreed that Gertrude was not a party to the late King’s murder and indeed knew nothing of it, a point which on the clear evidence of the play, is indisputable. They have also discussed whether or not Gertrude, guilty of more than an “o’er-hasty marriage”, had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband’s death. I will return to this point later on. Beyond discussing these two points, those critics who have dealt specifically with the Queen have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty. It is this tradition which a closer reading of the play will show to be erroneous.

Professor Bradley describes the traditional Gertrude thus:

The Queen 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. . . .

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-humoured sensual fashion.²

Later on, Bradley says of her that when affliction comes to her “the good in her
nature struggles to the surface through the heavy mass of sloth.”
Granville-Barker is not quite so extreme. Shakespeare, he says,
gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her
youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last
fade and wither; a pretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to
grow old. . . . She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has
but a passive part in the play’s action. She moves throughout in Claudius’
shadow; he holds her as he won her, by the witchcraft of his wit.³

Elsewhere Granville-Barker says “Gertrude who will certainly never see forty-
five again, might better be ‘old’. [That is, portrayed by an older, mature actress.]
But that would make her relations with Claudius—and their likelihood is vital to
the play—quite incredible” (p. 226). Granville-Barker is saying here that a woman
about forty-five years of age cannot feel any sexual passion nor arouse it. This
is one of the mistakes which lie at the heart of the misunderstanding about
Gertrude.

Professor Dover Wilson sees Gertrude as more forceful than either of these
two critics will admit, but even he finds the Ghost’s unwillingness to shock her
with knowledge of his murder to be one of the basic motivations of the play,
and he says of her “Gertrude is always hoping for the best.”⁴

Now whether Claudius won Gertrude before or after her husband’s death,
it was certainly not, as Granville-Barker implies, with “the witchcraft of his wit”
only. Granville-Barker would have us believe that Claudius won her simply by
the force of his persuasive tongue. “It is plain”, he writes, that the Queen “does
little except echo his [Claudius]’ wishes; sometimes—as in the welcome to
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—she repeats his very words” (p. 227), though
Wilson must admit later that Gertrude does not tell Claudius everything. With-
out dwelling here on the psychology of the Ghost, or the greater burden borne
by the Elizabethan words “witchcraft” and “wit”, we can plainly see, for the
Ghost tells us, how Claudius won the Queen: the Ghost considers his brother to
be garbage, and “lust”, the Ghost says, “will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey
on garbage” (I.v.54-55). “Lust”—in a woman of forty-five or more—is the key
word here. Bradley, Granville-Barker, and to a lesser extent Professor Dover
Wilson, misunderstand Gertrude largely because they are unable to see 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, appals
her son, and keeps him from the throne. Unable to explain her marriage to
Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman, they fail to
see Gertrude for the strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this
passion, sensible woman that she is.

To understand Gertrude properly, it is only necessary to examine the lines
Shakespeare has chosen for her to say. She is, except for her description of

Ophelia's death, concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes. If she is not profound, she is certainly never silly. We first hear her asking Hamlet to stop wearing black, to stop walking about with his eyes downcast, and to realize that death is an inevitable part of life. She is, in short, asking him not to give way to the passion of grief, a passion of whose force and dangers the Elizabethans were aware, as Miss Campbell has shown. Claudius echoes her with a well-reasoned argument against grief which was, in its philosophy if not in its language, a piece of commonplace Elizabethan lore. After Claudius' speech, Gertrude asks Hamlet to remain in Denmark, where he is rightly loved. Her speeches have been short, however warm and loving, and conciseness of statement is not the mark of a dull and shallow woman.

We next hear her, as Queen and gracious hostess, 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)

This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous. It is not the statement of a dull, slothful woman who can only echo her husband's words. Next, Polonius enters with his most unbrief apotheosis to brevity. The Queen interrupts him with five words: "More matter with less art" (II. ii. 95). It would be difficult to find a phrase more applicable to Polonius. When this gentleman, in no way deterred from his loquacity, after purveying the startling news that he has a daughter, begins to read a letter, the Queen asks pointedly "Came this from Hamlet to her?" (II. ii. 114).

We see Gertrude next in Act III, asking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with her usual directness, 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. 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)

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.

At the play, the Queen asks Hamlet to sit near her. She is clearly trying to make him feel he has a place in the court of Denmark. She does not speak again until Hamlet asks her how she likes the play. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III. ii. 240) is her immortal comment on the player queen. The

scene gives her four more words: when Claudius leaps to his feet, she asks "How fares my Lord?" (III. ii. 278).

I will for the moment pass over the scene in the Queen's closet, to follow her quickly through the remainder of the play. After the closet scene, the Queen comes to speak to Claudius. She tells him, as Hamlet has asked her to, that he, Hamlet, is mad, and has killed Polonius. She adds, however, that he now weeps for what he has done. She does not wish Claudius to know what she now knows, how wild and fearsome Hamlet has become. Later, she does not wish to see Ophelia, but hearing how distracted she is, consents. When Laertes bursts in ready to attack Claudius, she immediately steps between Claudius and Laertes to protect the King, and tells Laertes it is not Claudius who has killed his father. Laertes will of course soon learn this, but it is Gertrude who manages to tell him before he can do any meaningless damage. She leaves Laertes and the King together, and then returns to tell Laertes that his sister is drowned. She gives her news directly, realizing that suspense will increase the pain of it, but this is the one time in the play when her usual pointed conciseness would be the mark neither of intelligence nor kindness, and so, gently, and at some length, she tells Laertes of his sister's death, giving him time to recover from the shock of grief, and to absorb the meaning of her words. At Ophelia's funeral the Queen scatters flowers over the grave:

    Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
    I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
    I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
    And not t' have strew'd thy grave. (V. i. 266-269)

She is the only one present decently mourning the death of someone young, and not heated in the fire of some personal passion.

At the match between Hamlet and Laertes, the Queen believes that Hamlet is out of training, but glad to see him at some sport, she gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow, and drinks to his success. The drink is poisoned and she dies. But before she dies she does not waste time on vituperation; she warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned to prevent his drinking it. They are her last words. Those critics who have thought her stupid admire her death; they call it uncharacteristic.

In Act III, when Hamlet goes to his mother in her closet his nerves are pitched at the very height of tension; he is on the edge of hysteria. The possibility of murdering his mother has in fact entered his mind, and he has just met and refused an opportunity to kill Claudius. His mother, meanwhile, waiting for him, has told Polonius not to fear for her, but she knows when she sees Hamlet that he may be violently mad. Hamlet quips with her, insults her, tells her he wishes she were not his mother, and when she, still retaining dignity, attempts to end the interview, Hamlet seizes her and she cries for help. The important thing to note is that the Queen's cry "Thou wilt not murder me" (III. iv. 21) is not foolish. She has seen from Hamlet's demeanor that he is capable of murder, as indeed in the next instant he proves himself to be.

We next learn from the Queen's startled "As kill a king" (III. iv. 30) that she has no knowledge of the murder, though of course this is only confirmation here of what we already know. Then the Queen asks Hamlet why he is so hysterical:
THE CHARACTER OF HAMLET’S MOTHER

What have I done, that thou dar’st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me? (III. iv. 39-40)

Hamlet tells her: it is her lust, the need of sexual passion, which has driven her from the arms and memory of her husband to the incomparably cruder charms of his brother. He cries out that she has not even the excuse of youth for her lust:

O Shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron’s bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will. (III. iv. 82-88)

This is not only a lust, but a lust which throws out of joint all the structure of human morality and relationships. And the Queen admits it. If there is one quality that has characterized, and will characterize, every speech of Gertrude’s in the play, it is the ability to see reality clearly, and to express it. This talent is not lost when turned upon herself:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
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. 88-91)

She knows that lust has driven her, that this is her sin, and she admits it. Not that she wishes to linger in the contemplation of her sin. No more, she cries, no more. And then the Ghost appears to Hamlet. The Queen thinks him mad again—as well she might—but she promises Hamlet that she will not betray him—and she does not.

Where, in all that we have seen of Gertrude, is there the picture of “a soft animal nature, very dull and very shallow?” She may indeed be “animal” in the sense of “lustful”. But it does not follow that because she wishes to continue a life of sexual experience, her brain is soft or her wit unperceptive.

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. These critics, Professor Bradley among them (p. 166), 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. 41ff.). Professor 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 hasting to “incestuous sheets.” Why then should the Ghost waste precious moments in telling Hamlet what he was fully cognisant 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. . . . (P. 293)
Professor Dover Wilson and other critics have accepted the Ghost's word "adulterate" in its modern meaning. The Elizabethan word "adultery", however, was not restricted to its modern meaning, but was used to define any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one. Certainly the elder Hamlet considered the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude to be unchaste and unseemly, and while his use of the word "adulterate" indicates his very strong feelings about the marriage, it would not to an Elizabethan audience necessarily mean that he believed Gertrude to have been false to him before his death. It is important to notice, too, that the Ghost does not apply the term "adulterate" to Gertrude, and he may well have considered the term a just description of Claudius' entire sexual life.

But even if the Ghost used the word "adulterate" in full awareness of its modern restricted meaning, it is not necessary to assume on the basis of this single speech (and it is the only shadow of evidence we have for such a conclusion) that Gertrude was unfaithful to him while he lived. It is quite probable that the elder Hamlet still considered himself married to Gertrude, and he is moreover revolted that her lust for him ("why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on") should have so easily transferred itself to another. This is why he uses the expressions "seduce", "shameful lust", and others. Professor Dover Wilson has himself said "Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hastening to incestuous sheets"; the soul of the elder Hamlet was undoubtedly filled with nausea too, and this could well explain his using such strong language, as well as his taking the time to mention the matter at all. It is not necessary to consider Gertrude an adulteress to account for the speech of the Ghost.

Gertrude's lust was, of course, more important to the plot than we may at first perceive. Charlton Lewis, among others, has shown how Shakespeare kept many of the facts of the plots from which he borrowed without maintaining the structures which explained them. In the original Belleforest story, Gertrude (substituting Shakespeare's more familiar names) was daughter of the king; to become king, it was necessary to marry her. The elder Hamlet, in marrying Gertrude, ousted Claudius from the throne. Shakespeare retained the shell of this in his play. When she no longer has a husband, the form of election would be followed to declare the next king, in this case undoubtedly her son Hamlet. By marrying Gertrude, Claudius "popp'd in between th' election and my hopes" (V.ii.65), that is, kept young Hamlet from the throne. Gertrude's flaw of lust made Claudius' ambition possible, for without taking advantage of the Queen's desire still to be married, he could not have been king.

But Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech. In all the play, the person whose language hers most closely resembles is Horatio. "Sweets to the sweet", she has said at Ophelia's grave. "Good night sweet prince", Horatio says at the end. They are neither of them dull, or shallow, or slothful, though one of them is passion's slave.

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