



WOMEN WITHOUT VOICES: GENDER, POWER, AND SILENCE IN HAMLET

Sultamuratova Nigora Nurjanovna

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depicts a society in which women are known and judged almost entirely through the eyes of men. Gertrude and Ophelia, the play's only female characters, are placed in roles built on obedience, silence, and symbolic function rather than independent voice. Both women are continually discussed, corrected, or possessed by the men around them, yet they are rarely permitted to narrate their own experience or account for their own choices. This absence of agency is not an incidental gap in the play's design; it is a deliberate structural feature that reproduces the gender norms of early modern England, where women could not appear on the professional stage and possessed little legal, political, or sexual autonomy. Read together, Gertrude and Ophelia expose how thoroughly Shakespearean tragedy and the society that produced it depended on the containment of female speech, and how that containment operates not only through explicit prohibition but through the subtler mechanisms of definition, diagnosis, and spectacle.

This dynamic becomes explicit in one of *Hamlet*'s most infamous lines: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2.146). Spoken in the aftermath of his father's death and his mother's remarriage, Hamlet's declaration universalizes Gertrude's actions into a condemnation of all women. "Frailty" here is not merely physical weakness; it implies moral instability, untrustworthiness, and susceptibility to sin. The line is not descriptive but definitional: Hamlet assigns an essence to womanhood itself, binding it intrinsically to weakness before Gertrude has spoken a single line of self-defense in the play. This essentialism renders Gertrude's particular circumstances her position as a widowed queen in a politically unstable court, her limited options for survival and protection entirely irrelevant. What matters, in Hamlet's formulation, is that she is a woman, and thus already guilty. In this moment, Gertrude ceases to be a character with an interior life and becomes instead a symbol onto which male anxiety about desire, mortality, and control can be projected. Tellingly, the play never grants Gertrude a soliloquy; the audience is never permitted access to her private reasoning, so she is known to us only as she is known to Hamlet through accusation rather than confession.

Ophelia fares no better, and in some respects her erasure is more complete. Her madness, which culminates in her offstage death, is less a psychological unraveling than the logical endpoint of a life in which she has been instructed, again and again, to deny her own desires. Polonius directs her speech, Laertes polices her virtue, and Hamlet himself oscillates between seduction and cruelty, most visibly in the nunnery scene, where his repeated command to "get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.121) collapses tenderness

and contempt into a single gesture of dismissal. Ophelia's body becomes a site of negotiation between men who claim to act in her interest while systematically overriding her judgment. When her reason finally gives way, her madness is not treated as a crisis demanding intervention but as a spectacle to be passively observed reported secondhand by Gertrude, who narrates Ophelia's drowning with an almost aesthetic distance (4.7.166–183). Even in death, Ophelia is not permitted to speak for herself; her voice survives only as fragments of song, stripped of narrative coherence, a tragic emblem of female collapse under patriarchal strain rather than a testimony in its own right.

This pattern of containment becomes sharper when Hamlet is placed beside a tragedy built around a woman who refuses to be silent. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra commands the stage, justifies her actions in her own words, and drives the plot through deliberate, articulate action rather than suffering it passively (Aeschylus 1279–1330). Gertrude and Ophelia are permitted no equivalent authority; their tragedies unfold around them rather than through them. Elaine Showalter has argued that Ophelia in particular has functioned across centuries of criticism and performance as a screen for cultural fantasies about female madness, with each era "rewriting" her according to its own anxieties rather than attending to her as a dramatic subject (Showalter 80–83). Coppélia Kahn extends this argument to the play as a whole, suggesting that Hamlet's crisis of masculine identity is worked out largely at women's expense, with Gertrude and Ophelia absorbing the psychic costs of a conflict that is never really theirs (Kahn 119–124). Read through this lens, the muting of Gertrude and Ophelia is not a side effect of the plot but one of its organizing principles: male selfhood in *Hamlet* is constituted precisely through the surveillance, diagnosis, and eventual disposal of the women around it.

The tragedy of *Hamlet*, then, does not lie only in political intrigue or metaphysical doubt; it lies also in the quiet erasure of women as autonomous figures. Gertrude and Ophelia are punished not simply for what they do but for their visibility, their sexuality, and their inability to conform to roles that permit no contradiction. When Gertrude dares to love and remarry, she is vilified before she can explain herself. When Ophelia breaks under the accumulated weight of male control, she is mourned as an object rather than heard as a subject. Unlike Clytemnestra, neither woman is allowed to dominate the narrative stage; instead, their suffering is muted, their agency curtailed, and their resistance quietly absorbed into the larger machinery of male conflict. To read *Hamlet* with attention to Gertrude and Ophelia is therefore to recognize that the play's famous silences are not empty they are structured, gendered, and full of meaning the text itself refuses to let its women speak aloud.



Works Cited

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. Translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, University of California Press, 1979.

Kahn, Coppélia. *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*. University of California Press, 1981.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, 2006.

Showalter, Elaine. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism." *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, edited by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, Methuen, 1985, pp. 77–94.

