

An Open Access, Widely Indexed, Peer Reviewed Referred  
Journal  
Vol. 1 No. 2, June, 2024

## The Influence and Role of Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet': A Detailed Analysis

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:* Gertrude,  
Hamlet, Shakespeare,  
feminist analysis,  
influence, gender politics,  
tragedy.

*Received :* 12, April

*Revised :* 26, May

*Accepted:* 04, June

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### ABSTRACT

Queen Gertrude in William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" remains a compelling subject for scholarly investigation, embodying a character whose complexities challenge traditional interpretations. This study embarks on an in-depth exploration of Gertrude's multifaceted influence within the play, examining her actions, relationships, and motivations with a critical lens. By adopting a feminist perspective, this analysis sheds new light on Gertrude's pivotal role in the narrative structure and thematic development of "Hamlet." It delves into how Gertrude navigates the power dynamics and gender politics of the Elizabethan era, influencing not only the plot but also the psychological and emotional landscapes of other key characters, particularly her son, Hamlet. Themes of loyalty, betrayal, and authority are re-evaluated, revealing Gertrude's agency and significance beyond mere plot progression. Drawing from an extensive array of critical sources, this study positions Gertrude as a central figure whose actions and motivations resonate with contemporary discussions on gender and power, offering a refreshed understanding of her role in Shakespeare's tragedy.

### INTRODUCTION

ISSN: 3006-449X

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.11301449](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11301449)

<https://ijddb.com/index.php>

William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is renowned for its intricate exploration of human psychology, moral ambiguity, and the complexities of familial relationships (Shakespeare, 2003, pp. 132-158). At the heart of this enduring tragedy lies Queen Gertrude, whose character exerts a profound influence on the unfolding events and the development of other characters (Bloom, 1998, pp. 234-256). This introduction embarks on a scholarly journey into Gertrude's multifaceted influence within "Hamlet," delving into her actions, relationships, and motivations with meticulous detail. Gertrude is introduced to the audience as the widow of King Hamlet and the mother of Prince Hamlet, the titular character. Her hasty remarriage to King Claudius, her late husband's brother, shortly after King Hamlet's death, serves as a catalyst for much of the conflict and drama that ensues (Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115). Hamlet's vehement disapproval of his mother's marriage reflects his deep-seated sense of betrayal and moral outrage, setting the stage for a tumultuous exploration of loyalty, betrayal, and revenge (Bloom, 1998, pp. 234-256).

Throughout "Hamlet," Gertrude's character is marked by complexity and ambiguity, inviting a myriad of interpretations from scholars and audiences alike. Some critics view Gertrude as a passive and naive figure, easily manipulated by those around her (Showalter, 1985, pp. 156-171), while others perceive her as a more nuanced and morally ambiguous character, grappling with her own desires and loyalties (Greenblatt, 2002, pp. 145-167). Indeed, Gertrude's relationships with Claudius and Hamlet are fraught with tension and ambiguity, adding layers of depth to her character and the themes explored in the play (Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115).

Gertrude's marriage to Claudius serves as a focal point of tension within "Hamlet," as it not only raises questions about her loyalty to her late husband but also about her complicity in his murder. Critics have debated the extent of Gertrude's guilt and whether her actions are driven by genuine affection for Claudius or a desire for political stability. Additionally, Gertrude's relationship with Hamlet is fraught with complexity, as her attempts to reconcile with her son are met with suspicion and resentment.

Furthermore, Gertrude's character serves as a lens through which to explore broader thematic concerns within "Hamlet," such as power dynamics, gender politics, and the nature of madness. As queen, Gertrude occupies a position of privilege and authority within the court of Elsinore, yet her agency is often constrained by societal expectations and the demands of her male counterparts. Her attempts to navigate these constraints highlight the challenges faced by women in positions of power, as they are forced to negotiate between their personal desires and their public responsibilities.

In examining Gertrude's influence within "Hamlet," it is essential to consider the broader socio-political context of Shakespearean England, where patriarchal norms and gender hierarchies governed social interactions and power dynamics. Gertrude's character serves as a microcosm of the tensions and contradictions

inherent in early modern society, as she navigates the treacherous waters of court politics with varying degrees of success.

Queen Gertrude occupies a central and complex role within "Hamlet," exerting a significant influence on the plot, themes, and characters. Through her actions, relationships, and inner turmoil, Gertrude embodies the tensions between loyalty and betrayal, love and deception, that pervade the play. By examining Gertrude's role within "Hamlet," scholars gain valuable insights into Shakespeare's exploration of human nature and the complexities of moral responsibility.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Queen Gertrude's influence in William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" extends far beyond her immediate relationships, permeating the intricate tapestry of the play's narrative and thematic elements. This section reviews current scholarly perspectives on Gertrude's character, summarizing key findings and debates within the academic community.

Gertrude's character is introduced to the audience as the widow of King Hamlet and the mother of Prince Hamlet, the protagonist of the play. Scholars such as Adelman (1992, pp. 45-67) and Bloom (1998, pp. 234-256) have debated the implications of Gertrude's hasty remarriage to Claudius. Some argue that this act signifies her loyalty to Claudius and a desire for political stability, while others view it as a betrayal of King Hamlet and a catalyst for Hamlet's psychological turmoil (Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115).

Gertrude's relationship with Hamlet is equally fraught with tension and ambiguity. Critics like Smith (1996, pp. 45-60) and Neely (1980, pp. 57-74) highlight the complexity of Gertrude's relationship with her son. Hamlet's fixation on his mother's remarriage and perceived betrayal underscores the oedipal undertones in their interactions, contributing to his existential crisis and descent into madness (Greenblatt, 2002, pp. 145-167). Gertrude's attempts to reconcile with Hamlet are met with suspicion and resentment, as he struggles to come to terms with his own conflicting emotions and sense of moral duty. Their strained relationship serves as a microcosm of the broader themes of loyalty, betrayal, and the complexities of familial bonds explored in the play.

Furthermore, Gertrude's character serves as a lens through which to explore broader thematic concerns within "Hamlet," such as power dynamics, gender politics, and the nature of madness. Feminist scholars such as Jardine (1983, pp. 122-138) and Belsey (1985, pp. 89-103) examine how Gertrude's character navigates the patriarchal constraints of the Elizabethan court. Her attempts to balance personal desires with public responsibilities illustrate the challenges faced by women in positions of power during Shakespeare's time (Showalter, 1985, pp. 156-171).

The psychological impact of Gertrude's actions on Hamlet and other characters is a recurring theme in the literature. Psychoanalytic critics, including Freud (1900, pp. 310-335) and Jones (1949, pp. 98-112), argue that Gertrude's sexuality and perceived moral weakness are central to Hamlet's internal conflict and the play's exploration of madness and reality (Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115). Queen Gertrude's influence within "Hamlet" is multifaceted and profound, permeating every aspect of the play's narrative and thematic exploration. Through her actions, relationships, and inner turmoil, Gertrude embodies the complexities of human nature and the moral ambiguities inherent in Shakespeare's tragedy. By delving into Gertrude's character, scholars gain valuable insights into the complexities of Shakespeare's exploration of human psychology, power dynamics, and the complexities of familial relationships.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a comprehensive literature review methodology to examine Queen Gertrude's influence within "Hamlet." By surveying a wide range of scholarly articles, critical essays, and academic publications, this study aims to synthesize existing research and present an overview of current thinking on the topic. The methodology involves:

- **Literature Selection:** Identifying and selecting relevant scholarly works that discuss Queen Gertrude's character, relationships, and influence in "Hamlet" (Shakespeare, 2003, pp. 132-158; Bloom, 1998, pp. 234-256; Greenblatt, 2002, pp. 145-167; Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115; Showalter, 1985, pp. 156-171).
- **Thematic Analysis:** Categorizing the selected literature into key themes such as loyalty, betrayal, power dynamics, gender politics, and psychological impact.
- **Critical Synthesis:** Analyzing the perspectives and arguments presented in the literature, highlighting points of consensus and contention among scholars.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Situating Gertrude's character within the broader socio-political context of Shakespearean England, examining how historical and cultural factors influence interpretations of her role (Bloom, 1998, pp. 234-256; Greenblatt, 2002, pp. 145-167).

### **DISCUSSION**

Queen Gertrude's character in William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" serves as a crucial focal point for the play's intricate narrative and thematic development. Her role and actions exert a profound influence on the unfolding events, relationships, and psychological dynamics within the play. This section delves deeper into the complex nature of Gertrude's influence, exploring her interactions with Claudius and Hamlet, and her navigation of gender politics in the Elizabethan context.

One of the most significant aspects of Gertrude's influence is her relationship with Claudius. Her marriage to Claudius, shortly after King Hamlet's death, reshapes the political landscape of Elsinore. This union raises fundamental

questions about her loyalty and complicity. Some scholars, such as Bloom (1998, pp. 234-256), suggest that Gertrude's actions reflect a pragmatic quest for political stability and personal security. Others, like Wilson (1951, pp. 97-115), argue that her quick remarriage to Claudius indicates a deeper involvement in the conspiracy against King Hamlet. This debate highlights the moral ambiguity of her character and sets the stage for Hamlet's internal conflict.

Gertrude's relationship with her son, Hamlet, is equally complex and pivotal to the play's narrative. Hamlet's profound sense of betrayal and disgust towards his mother's remarriage fuels his existential crisis and descent into madness. Critics such as Greenblatt (2002, pp. 145-167) emphasize the oedipal undertones in Hamlet's fixation on his mother's sexual relationship with Claudius. This preoccupation exacerbates his psychological turmoil, driving him to question the moral fabric of his world and his place within it. Gertrude's attempts to reconcile with Hamlet, though earnest, are met with suspicion and resentment, reflecting his deep-seated emotional and moral conflict. This strained mother-son relationship serves as a microcosm for the broader themes of loyalty, betrayal, and the psychological complexities of familial bonds explored in the play.

Moreover, Gertrude's character provides a lens through which to examine the broader thematic concerns of power dynamics and gender politics in "Hamlet." As queen, Gertrude occupies a position of significant influence, yet her agency is constrained by the patriarchal structures of the Elizabethan court. Feminist scholars, such as Jardine (1983, pp. 122-138) and Belsey (1985, pp. 89-103), analyze how Gertrude navigates these constraints, balancing her personal desires with her public responsibilities. Despite her status, she is often depicted as a figure controlled by the men around her, from King Hamlet to Claudius and even her son, Hamlet. This dynamic underscores the limitations imposed on women in positions of power during Shakespeare's time, reflecting broader societal expectations and gender norms.

The psychological dynamics between Gertrude and Hamlet are central to the play's exploration of madness and reality. Psychoanalytic critics, including Freud (1900, pp. 310-335) and Jones (1949 pp. 98-112), argue that Gertrude's sexuality and perceived moral weakness are pivotal to Hamlet's internal conflict. Hamlet's obsession with his mother's perceived betrayal and her relationship with Claudius exacerbates his internal conflict, driving much of the play's exploration of madness and reality. Wilson (1951, pp. 97-115) and other psychoanalytic critics highlight how Gertrude's character contributes to the thematic concerns of madness, reality, and moral ambiguity in "Hamlet."

### **Findings**

This study reveals several key insights into Queen Gertrude's influence in "Hamlet":

**Loyalty and Betrayal:** Gertrude's remarriage to Claudius is a pivotal event that shapes the entire narrative of "Hamlet." This act raises fundamental questions about her loyalty and potential complicity in King Hamlet's murder. Scholars like Wilson (1951, pp. 97-115) view her actions as a betrayal of her former husband, suggesting a possible involvement in the conspiracy. Conversely, others like Bloom (1998, pp. 234-256) interpret her remarriage as a pragmatic decision aimed at ensuring political stability and personal security. This duality reflects the moral ambiguity that characterizes Gertrude throughout the play.

**Complex Familial Bonds:** Gertrude's relationship with Hamlet underscores the intricate nature of familial relationships and the profound psychological impact of perceived betrayal. Hamlet's intense reaction to his mother's remarriage reveals deep oedipal conflicts and a struggle with moral integrity. Their interactions, fraught with tension and misunderstanding, highlight the themes of loyalty, revenge, and psychological unraveling. Greenblatt (2002, pp. 145-167) and Showalter (1985, pp. 156-171) emphasize how this strained relationship serves as a microcosm for the broader familial and ethical complexities explored in the play.

**Gender and Power:** Gertrude's navigation of the patriarchal constraints within the court of Elsinore illustrates the challenges faced by women in positions of power. Despite her status as queen, her agency is limited by societal expectations and male authority. Showalter (1985, pp. 156-171) and Bloom (1998, pp. 234-256) examine how Gertrude balances her personal desires with her public responsibilities, reflecting the broader gender dynamics of the Elizabethan era. Her character provides a lens through which to explore the limitations imposed on women and the societal pressures they faced.

**Psychological Catalyst:** Gertrude's actions significantly impact Hamlet's psychological state, serving as a catalyst for his existential and moral dilemmas. Hamlet's obsession with his mother's perceived betrayal and her relationship with Claudius exacerbates his internal conflict, driving much of the play's exploration of madness and reality. Wilson (1951, pp. 97-115) and other psychoanalytic critics highlight how Gertrude's character contributes to the thematic concerns of madness, reality, and moral ambiguity in "Hamlet."

### **Identifying Gaps**

Despite extensive scholarship on Queen Gertrude, several gaps remain in our understanding of her influence within the play:

**Motivations and True Nature:** The ambiguity surrounding Gertrude's motivations and true nature requires further exploration. Understanding her true intentions could provide deeper insights into her influence within the play. Scholars are divided on whether she is a naive figure manipulated by those around her or a more complicit character in the court's political machinations.

Clarifying her motivations could offer a more nuanced understanding of her role in the narrative (Greenblatt, 2002, pp. 145-167).

Relationship with Claudius: The nature of Gertrude's relationship with Claudius remains enigmatic. Critics have debated the extent of her loyalty to Claudius and her involvement in King Hamlet's murder. Further analysis through psychoanalytic or feminist lenses could illuminate her role and agency, shedding light on the depth and complexity of her relationship with Claudius (Bloom, 1998, pp. 234-256).

Impact on Hamlet: The psychological dynamics between Gertrude and Hamlet warrant closer examination. Hamlet's intense reaction to his mother's remarriage and his preoccupation with her sexuality suggest a deep-seated psychological conflict that extends beyond mere filial duty. Understanding the depth of Hamlet's psychological conflict and Gertrude's influence could offer new perspectives on their relationship and the broader themes of madness and reality in the play (Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115).

Socio-Political Context: Gertrude's role within the broader socio-political context of "Hamlet" and the gender dynamics of Shakespearean England deserve further scrutiny. Examining these aspects could enhance our understanding of her character's significance and the challenges she faces within the patriarchal structures of the time (Showalter, 1985, pp. 156-171).

In conclusion, while much has been written about Queen Gertrude, further exploration of these gaps could provide a more nuanced understanding of her character and her profound impact on the play's narrative and themes. Her actions, relationships, and the societal constraints she navigates remain fertile ground for scholarly inquiry, offering valuable insights into Shakespeare's exploration of human nature, power dynamics, and the complexities of familial relationships.

## CONCLUSION

In William Shakespeare's "Hamlet," Queen Gertrude emerges as a character of profound complexity and significance, whose influence permeates every aspect of the play's narrative and thematic exploration (Shakespeare, 2003, pp. 132-158). Through a comprehensive review and thematic analysis, this study has uncovered the multifaceted nature of Gertrude's influence and identified key gaps in our understanding. Gertrude's actions, relationships, and motivations drive much of the play's drama, underscoring themes of loyalty, betrayal, and the psychological turmoil of other characters (Bloom, 1998, pp. 234-256). Her navigation of patriarchal constraints and her impact on Hamlet's psyche highlight the challenges and complexities faced by women in positions of power (Showalter, 1985, pp. 156-171; Greenblatt, 2002, pp. 145-167). Despite extensive scholarship, the ambiguity of Gertrude's character and her relationships invites further exploration. By delving into these areas, scholars can gain deeper insights

into Shakespeare's exploration of human psychology, power dynamics, and the complexities of familial relationships, enriching our appreciation of this timeless tragedy (Wilson, 1951, pp. 97-115).



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