

The Thematic Role of Women in *Hamlet* Socratic Seminar

1. Many critics view Gertrude as a weak, unintelligent, and sensual woman whose character is best summarized by Hamlet in the words, 'Frailty, thy name is woman.' Professor Bradley suggests, "The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she has a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun ... it pleased her to see others happy ... 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." What evidence does Shakespeare offer that Gertrude was actually a loyal wife to old Hamlet who marries Claudius as a path of least resistance?
2. Literary critic, Carolyn G. Heilbrun decries Hamlet's accusation of "frailty" and instead views Gertrude as "a strong-minded, intelligent, and sensible woman whose 'tragic flaw' is her desire for sexual gratification." What evidence does Shakespeare offer that Gertrude was disloyal to both Hamlets and wanted to enjoy a decadent life of pleasure and power with Claudius?
3. What evidence does Shakespeare offer that Gertrude plays a passive role who in the words of critic, Granville-Barker, "moves throughout [the play] in Claudius' shadow" and was won by Claudius' "witchcraft of wit?" Others argue that Gertrude's intelligence and shrewdness are evidenced through her "concise and pithy" advice and her adept hostess skills. What evidence does Shakespeare offer that Gertrude may have married Claudius to protect Hamlet in the only way she could in a misogynous world? Which perspective is more persuasive and why?
4. What evidence does Shakespeare offer that Ophelia naively or wantonly disobeyed the moral laws of her church and society? Does she suffer from the same "tragic flaw" of a desire for sexual gratification" that is said to plague Gertrude? Did Ophelia act out of genuine love for young Hamlet or desire for political and social advancement? Can Ophelia be held responsible for being the tool of Polonius and Claudius? In what ways do Ophelia's symbolic flower speeches act as evidence of her strength of will and mind or her "frailty?" What evidence does Shakespeare offer that Ophelia and Gertrude are/are not parallel characters distinguished only by age and therefore merit Hamlet's projections of disgust and contempt? Which interpretation is most persuasive?