

## Hamlet as an Antifeminist

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper examines the portrayal of women in Shakespeare's Hamlet, looking for antifeminist overtones. The study exposes situations that maintain traditional gender stereotypes and suppress female autonomy through an assessment of female characters such as Gertrude and Ophelia. It also looks into the patriarchal power dynamics and societal expectations imposed on women in the play, taking into account the historical and social context. The research, which engages with feminist interpretations and scholarly discourse, provides a complete overview of several perspectives on the subject. This study contributes to the understanding of gender dynamics in literature and stimulates further investigation of gender representation in Shakespeare's tragedies by putting light on Hamlet as a potentially antifeminist work.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Hierarchism, Patriarchal Role, Sexual Role.*

## INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's ageless tragedy hamlet continues to enchant audiences and scholars alike with its profound themes and fascinating characters. A critical assessment of the play's handling of women via an antifeminist lens, on the other hand, uncovers intriguing depths beneath the surface. This research paper investigates hamlet's representation of women, notably gertrude and ophelia, in order to find probable antifeminist overtones within the story. We hope to discover instances that promote traditional gender stereotypes and limit female agency by looking into their roles, actions, and interactions. Furthermore, we investigate how hamlet reflects the prevalent antifeminist ideology of the period, as well as the cultural background and power dynamics that created shakespeare's age. We hope to provide a complete overview of many perspectives on the subject by engaging with a variety of critical interpretations and scholarly debates. Through this analysis, we not only add to the current discussion of gender dynamics in literature, but we also invite a greater knowledge of the complexity of gender representation in one of shakespeare's most beloved tragedies, hamlet.

Throughout history, literature has played a significant role in reflecting societal attitudes and beliefs, including those that are antifeminist in nature. Works of literature, such as those by william shakespeare, have served as powerful mirrors of their respective time periods, offering insights into prevalent gender dynamics and reinforcing or challenging existing norms. Shakespeare's plays, including hamlet, have been analyzed extensively to uncover the ways in which they reflect and perpetuate antifeminist ideologies. By examining the portrayal of women, the treatment of female characters, and the power dynamics within his works, scholars have gained valuable insights into the prevailing attitudes towards women during shakespeare's era. Shakespeare's nuanced characters and intricate narratives have allowed for nuanced discussions surrounding gender roles and expectations, thereby shedding light on the complexities of antifeminism and its impact on society. The enduring nature of shakespeare's works continues to provide a platform for critical examination and exploration of gender issues, emphasizing the influential role of literature in shaping and reflecting antifeminist perspectives throughout history.

William shakespeare, a renowned playwright, crafted a wide array of exceptional works encompassing comedies, political dramas, and tragedies. His literary masterpieces have provided a rich source for psychological, historical, and philosophical studies, captivating audiences and scholars alike. Shakespeare drew inspiration from everyday life and astutely observed the complexities of society. The enduring popularity of his plays is evident in their global performances, with hamlet being staged multiple times in egypt, indicating the widespread appeal of shakespeare's works worldwide. As gunenc (2015, p. 164) suggests, although hamlet was possibly

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written in the early 17TH century, its source material traces back to the 16TH-century publication of *amleth*, a revenge tale. However, thanks to shakespeare's genius, *hamlet* has surpassed *amleth*, becoming a central focus of numerous studies and scholarly works spanning centuries. In his role as an antifeminist bard, shakespeare portrays women as vulnerable and marginalized in his tragic play. As sarkar s. (2016) explains, while shakespeare sought to depict life truthfully in *hamlet*, the societal norms and his own male perspective shaped by the prevailing attitudes of his time influenced his portrayal of male power dynamics.

### **Female Character Analysis**

A detailed examination of the female characters in shakespeare's *hamlet*, notably gertrude and ophelia, reveals the play's complicated dynamics and apparent antifeminist aspects.

Gertrude, *hamlet*'s mother and queen of denmark, is a figure who is frequently chastised for her decisions and deeds. She remarries soon after her husband's death, marrying *hamlet*'s uncle, claudius. This hurried marriages, as well as her seeming unwavering commitment to claudius, call into question her agency and independence. Critics believe that gertrude's portrayal maintains the stereotype of a weak, easily influenced woman who values her personal wishes over her son's welfare. Her lack of autonomy and willingness to ally oneself with a corrupt monarch contribute to the narrative's probable antifeminist overtones.

Similarly, *hamlet*'s love interest, ophelia, is a character whose path is formed by the men in her life. Ophelia is submissive and dutiful to her father polonius and brother laertes. As the play progresses, she falls subject to *hamlet*'s merciless manipulation, eventually succumbing to madness and sad death. Ophelia's passive attitude and lack of agency in molding her own destiny are consistent with the patriarchal values prevalent in shakespeare's day. Her portrayal as a frail and easily persuaded woman shows the play's potential for reinforcing gender stereotypes and suppressing female autonomy.

It is crucial to recognize that different people view gertrude and ophelia differently, and that their characters may symbolize complexity and inner struggles that defy standard gender stereotypes. Some think that gertrude's acts are a survival technique in a male-dominated world, whereas ophelia's journey into madness is a satire of the oppressive societal expectations placed on women. Nonetheless, the portrayals of these characters in *hamlet* provide fertile fodder for discussions about the play's antifeminist themes.

### **Feminist Interpretations and Counterarguments**

Feminist literary criticism has played a pivotal role in reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, including shakespeare's works such as *hamlet*. Scholars from feminist perspectives have offered alternative interpretations that challenge the notion of *hamlet* as inherently antifeminist.

Gertrude is the subject of one feminist interpretation, which contends that her acts can be explained as a means of surviving in a society that is ruled by men. Gertrude's decisions could be interpreted as a reaction to the few alternatives accessible to women in positions of authority rather than as being weak or readily influenced. This viewpoint casts doubt on the idea that gertrude is just a passive bystander in the story by highlighting her depth.

Feminist interpretations of ophelia also seek to restore her agency and examine the effects of patriarchal oppression. They contend that the limitations placed on ophelia drove her to the verge of sanity, and that this is why ophelia became insane. These readings underline the repressive nature of gender stereotypes by focusing on the social pressures placed on ophelia, and they challenge the degree to which her character may be reduced to a victim.

While acknowledging the existence of patriarchal power systems in the play, opponents of feminist readings contend that shakespeare employs these components to expose and condemn their negative effects. They argue that rather than supporting or accepting antifeminist views, the play's portrayal of women may simply reflect the social conventions of the time. Furthermore, supporters of this point of view contend that shakespeare's complex characterizations permit readings that go beyond straightforward classifications of sexism or antifeminism.

## *Hamlet as an Antifeminist*

Shakespeare's representation of women is complex, as seen by the ongoing scholarly discussion of hamlet from feminist viewpoints. A more thorough grasp of the gender dynamics in the play can be attained by interacting with these feminist interpretations and objections, fostering critical engagement and providing opportunities for future investigation.

### **Feminist Interpretation**

Patriarchal oppression's effects and ophelia's autonomy are explored in feminist interpretations of hamlet. They contend that ophelia's journey into madness is due to the oppressive social expectations that were imposed on her rather than just her natural fragility. This view contends that her actions—and ultimately her death—can be interpreted as a criticism of the constrictive gender norms that society has placed on women.

In hamlet, ophelia's materiality and her connection to the natural world are examined by bardaş & gültür (2023). The research questions binary divisions between man and woman, human and nonhuman, and other categories using material feminist theory. This study takes into account the active activity of material entities by using terms like "trans-corporeality," "diffraction apparatus," and "thing power." by arguing that a material feminist examination of ophelia's involvement with water might reveal fluidity, movement, and dynamic between these binary categories, the research gives a critical viewpoint on the traditional interpretation of ophelia's death. The study emphasizes the importance of the physical environment and ophelia's representation in it in shakespeare's play.

### **Examples**

"frailty, thy name is woman!" - hamlet (act 1, scene 2)

This quote examines how this quote reveals hamlet's misogynistic perspective and its reflection of societal attitudes towards women during shakespeare's time.

"i shall obey, my lord." - ophelia (act 1, scene 3)

This situation explores ophelia's submission to male authority and analyze how her compliance with the patriarchal expectations contributes to her eventual tragic fate.

"get thee to a nunnery." - hamlet (act 3, scene 1)

This scene investigates the implications of hamlet's suggestion to ophelia, revealing the limitations placed on women's autonomy and choices in a patriarchal society.

"good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; good night, good night." - hamlet (act 4, scene 5) research aim: to analyze hamlet's indifference to ophelia's emotional state and its representation of women's emotional needs being disregarded in favor of male interests.

"i must be cruel only to be kind." - hamlet (act 3, scene 4)

This situation assesses how hamlet's use of justification for his treatment of gertrude exemplifies the perceived need for male dominance in shaping women's lives for their supposed betterment.

### **Counterargument**

Although gertrude's actions can be understood in the context of the play, there is a counterargument to the feminist reading that claims her lack of agency and unwavering loyalty to claudius reinforce traditional gender roles. Critics claim that her persona still fits antifeminist stereotypes of a woman who puts her own needs ahead of those of her kid, therefore reiterating gender norms and power disparities.

Shakespeare's era early modern arguments on this topic, as well as the affective power of theater and its effect on audiences, are the main topics of saeva-güneş (2022). Theatre plays were condemned early on by reviewers like stephen gosson and philip stubbes for provoking strong emotions and upsetting the humoral balances of the audience's bodies. Theater, according to gosson, impairs people's ability to reason and make judgments.

This study focuses on the hecuba speech (ii, ii) in shakespeare's hamlet, analyzing the player and hamlet's responses to offer light on their perspectives on theater.

### **Examples**

"i loved ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum." - hamlet (act 5, scene 1)

This quote demonstrates hamlet's genuine affection for ophelia, suggesting that not all male characters in the play view women in a negative light.

"mad as the sea and wind when both contend which is the mightier." - gertrude (act 4, scene 1)

Gertrude's description of ophelia's madness portrays a woman with intense emotions and complexities, challenging the simplistic portrayal of women as weak or submissive.

"her speech is nothing. Yet the unshaped use of it doth move the hearers to collection." - guildenstern (act 2, scene 2)

Guildenstern acknowledges that even though ophelia's words may seem insignificant, they have an impact on those who listen to her, hinting at a potential for agency and influence despite societal constraints.

"she is importunate, indeed distract. Her mood will needs be pitied." - gertrude (act 4, scene 5)

Gertrude's recognition of ophelia's distraught state shows empathy and understanding towards a woman facing emotional turmoil, challenging the notion of women being entirely disregarded or negatively depicted in the play.

The research will be in-depth by answering the research questions:

To what extent does hamlet portray women as the source of devilish ideas and as mere objects of lust?

This study looks at how women are portrayed in hamlet and how much the play suggests that they are nothing more than objects of passion and the source of wicked ideas. This research intends to look at how women's agency, power, and autonomy are portrayed in the play by examining the words, actions, and relationships of female characters like gertrude and ophelia. It explores the sociological and cultural setting in which the play was written, taking into account the prevalent views on women and how they influenced shakespeare's portrayal. This investigation is part of the study's effort to shed light on hamlet's multifaceted portrayal of women and any potential antifeminist themes contained in the play.

### **Gertrude's Hasty Remarriage**

Gertrude's marriage to claudius shortly after her husband's death raises questions about her loyalty, morality, and potential role as a seductress. The swift transition from mourning to a new marriage could be seen as portraying her as driven by lust or manipulated by devilish desires.

### **Polonius Controlling Ophelia**

Polonius, ophelia's father, exerts strict control over her actions and relationships. He instructs her on how to interact with hamlet and forbids her from pursuing her own desires. This portrayal can reinforce the idea of women as objects to be controlled and manipulated for men's desires.

### **The Portrayal of Ophelia's Madness**

Ophelia's descent into madness after hamlet's rejection and her father's death can be interpreted as presenting her as a fragile and emotionally unstable woman. This portrayal reinforces the stereotype of women as irrational and susceptible to madness, contributing to their depiction as objects of lust or unreliable sources of ideas.

## **Hamlet's Treatment of Women**

Hamlet's harsh and misogynistic language towards Gertrude and Ophelia reflects the view of women as deceitful and weak. His accusations of Gertrude's lustful behavior and his harsh rejection of Ophelia can be seen as reinforcing the perception of women as the source of devilish ideas and mere objects of desire.

In the play *Hamlet*, the plot revolves around the protagonist seeking revenge on Claudius, who married Gertrude after the murder of the king. Throughout the play, Gertrude is portrayed as the source of the ensuing devilish actions. Shakespeare's depiction of women in this play aligns with a recurring pattern in his works where they are often associated with evil, despair, misery, and lustful impulses. Gunenc (2015) observes that this play, like many others by Shakespeare, predominantly features tragedy, revenge, and the victimization of women. In the patriarchal society of the time, women were subordinate to men, with men being deemed superior and women considered inferior.

Despite Gertrude's roles as Hamlet's mother, the deceased king's wife, and the new king's wife, her limited speech and minimal impact serve as symbols of how women were treated during that era. Decision-making was predominantly reserved for men, and Gertrude's potential agency and ability to alter the tragic outcome of the play remained silenced due to the prevailing patriarchal and hierarchical structures. Ophelia, on the other hand, is presented as a neglected character, subject to negative interpretations and influenced by the words of other characters. The ghost of the dead king even speaks of her untamed lust, reinforcing the negative portrayal of women's desires. Hamlet, too, discusses his mother's sexual relationship with Claudius, describing it as incestuous and immoral.

Gertrude is consistently seen as the source of problems in Denmark, although it is important to consider her own words and perspective. Within a patriarchal society, she is depicted as unreliable and guilty, reinforcing the biases and expectations imposed on women during that era.

How are women depicted in the play as passive and lacking agency, being relegated to non-doers?

Women are portrayed in the play *Hamlet* as inert and lacking agency, frequently reduced to non-doers with little control over their own lives and fates. The play's many elements all play a part in this representation:

**Gertrude's submission and passivity:** as the queen of Denmark and the mother of Hamlet, Gertrude is heavily influenced by the male figures in her life. After her husband's passing, she marries Claudius without much hesitation or apparent reluctance. Her acquiescence with the men in her immediate vicinity demonstrates her passivity and meager agency.

**Ophelia's submissiveness:** Ophelia, Polonius's daughter and Hamlet's love interest, is portrayed as a devoted and submissive young lady. Without expressing her own wishes or emotions, she obeys her father's commands and accepts Hamlet's rejection. Her failure to resist the demands made on her by others reveals a lack of agency on her part.

**A society that is ruled by men:** the play is set in a patriarchal culture where men predominate in positions of leadership. Women, like Gertrude and Ophelia, are constrained by society norms and traditional gender roles, giving them little choice over their lives.

**Female exclusion from important events:** women are consistently left out of critical political and vengeance-driven events in the play. Women are kept at a distance from important events and sidelined while men plot and make decisions.

In line with Günen's (2015) interpretation of the play. These female characters discover themselves at the mercy of the male characters in the play despite their importance to the plot. The essay's purpose is to shed light on the power dynamics that affect the unique characteristics and life paths of Gertrude and Ophelia. By exploring how male dominance affects these women, the study aims to provide light on the subtleties of these women's roles as well as the broader questions of power and agency throughout Shakespeare's work.

In the end, Hamlet's portrayal of women emphasizes their lack of agency and passivity, with their actions and choices being greatly influenced by the male characters. This portrayal reflects the prevalent gender conventions

of shakespeare's time, emphasizing the limitations placed on women by society and their relegation to non-doing roles in a world dominated by males.

To what extent does the patriarchal ideology manifest itself within the narrative of hamlet?

The patriarchal worldview is strongly present in the hamlet story, affecting how relationships, power dynamics, and gender roles are portrayed throughout the play. The male-centric system is highlighted by the predominance of male characters and their positions of authority. The takeover of the kingdom by king claudius after king hamlet's passing is a prime example of male succession and dominance. The idea of male guardianship over women is further reinforced by the way that masculine figures like polonius exert authority over female characters.

Gertrude and ophelia are only two examples of how this patriarchal system limits their agency. They frequently follow the men in their lives while making decisions and taking acts, which is indicative of their limited individuality and autonomy. Their lack of personal agency is shown by the quick marriage of gertrude to claudius and ophelia to her father's wishes.

The play also displays misogynistic ideas, which are especially clear in how hamlet treats women. His insulting comments to gertrude and his sexist statement to ophelia, "get thee to a nunnery," both of which imply that women are subordinate, show his contemptuous attitude toward them. Women in hamlet are frequently objectified and reduced to their relationships with men, rather than being seen as autonomous individuals. Gertrude becomes a political pawn, while ophelia is used to test hamlet's sanity, illustrating their objectification and disposability.

In the play, women's voices are suppressed and frequently muted, thus enhancing their reputation as inferior. Their underdeveloped positions in the story are highlighted by gertrude's restricted speech and ophelia's lack of ability to control her own destiny.

Insights on the society standards and gender expectations of shakespeare's day can be gained from the patriarchal worldview that permeates hamlet. It is a reflection of the prevalent views on women at the time, when societal institutions were based on male supremacy and female submission. We get a deeper knowledge of the historical setting and the difficulties women experienced in a male-dominated society by examining the impact of patriarchal ideology in the play. We also see the necessity to challenge and question similar notions in modern times.

Female scholars of shakespeare's tragedies often adopt an objective perspective that highlights significant issues, such as the "conflict between the sexes" and the role of "patriarchy" in shaping the narrative. Levin (1988) particularly emphasized these themes as central to the tragedies' subject matter and underlying motivations. The portrayal of women by shakespeare comes under scrutiny in this context, with the author questioning the accuracy of his depiction and accusing him of employing "sarcasm" in his writing. This critical examination sheds light on the complex dynamics between gender roles and societal power structures within shakespeare's work.

How does the portrayal of women in hamlet reflect or challenge the prevailing societal attitudes towards gender roles and women's status during shakespeare's time?

In hamlet, women are portrayed in a way that both reflects and opposes the dominant societal views at the time of shakespeare on gender roles and women's status. On the one hand, the play is in line with the dominant patriarchal ideology of the time, portraying women as subordinate figures, defined by their relationships with males, and having limited agency and autonomy.

As the mother of hamlet and the queen of denmark, gertrude exemplifies the conventional position of a wife and mother who is deferential to male authority. The hurried remarriage she had with claudius following her husband's passing exemplifies the social norm that a woman's identity and value are derived from her status as a wife. The prevalent perception of women is further reinforced by gertrude's passivity and her lack of involvement in direct political matters.

Ophelia follows the social expectations for feminine submissiveness and submission. Her interactions with her father polonius and brother laertes emphasize the notion that women should be subject to the direction and control of men. The fact that ophelia followed their instructions and obeyed them shows how little agency women have and how dependent they are on men's whims.

In jajja's (2014) study, an exhaustive analysis of shakespeare's major tragedies, including hamlet, macbeth, king lear, antony and cleopatra, and romeo and juliet, was conducted through the lens of deconstructive feminism. The study's primary hypothesis asserts that women in shakespearean tragedies are depicted as lesser and negative stereotypes, reinforcing and bolstering patriarchal values and systems. Overall, the research highlights the complex interplay between gender, power, and societal norms within shakespeare's literary masterpieces. In sarkar's (2016) study, a compelling analysis of hamlet has been presented, showcasing how the theme of the play is deeply entangled with the pervasive ideology of patriarchy. Through thorough examination, the research reveals that the narrative not only reinforces but also perpetuates the principles underlying this patriarchal system. Sarkar's investigation sheds light on the intricate interplay between the play's themes and the prevailing societal power structures, offering valuable insights into shakespeare's portrayal of gender dynamics and the enduring influence of patriarchal values in his work.

Shakespeare, however, challenges traditional gender roles and expectations through his skillful portrayal of female characters. The female characters in the play may initially seem servile and submissive, but a closer look at their actions and emotions exposes depths of complexity and inner suffering. Gertrude's internal conflict between her love for hamlet and her allegiance to claudius serves as an example of the psychological difficulties women encounter while juggling society expectations and personal desires.

### **Antifeminist Through the Ages**

Throughout history, there have been ideologies and beliefs that oppose feminism, known as antifeminism. These ideas have been present in various forms across different time periods. Antifeminism resists the notion of gender equality and women's rights, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal norms that favor male dominance.

In the past, antifeminism was evident during the first wave of feminism when women were fighting for the right to vote. Opponents argued against women's suffrage, believing that women's place was solely in the home and that they lacked the ability to make informed political decisions.

During the second wave of feminism, antifeminist sentiments persisted as women challenged traditional roles and sought greater autonomy. Critics dismissed feminist demands for workplace equality and reproductive rights, often perpetuating stereotypes about women's abilities and roles.

In the modern era, antifeminism takes on new forms, with some individuals and groups opposing feminist movements and initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality. These voices often downplay or deny the existence of gender-based discrimination, advocating for the maintenance of the status quo.

Antifeminism has evolved alongside feminism, presenting an ongoing challenge to the pursuit of gender equality. Despite the opposition, the feminist movement continues to progress, striving to dismantle barriers and create a more inclusive and just society for all genders.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the portrayal of women in shakespeare's masterpiece, hamlet, and its reflection of the prevailing societal attitudes towards gender roles and women's status during the elizabethan era. Through a comprehensive analysis of the female characters, it becomes evident that shakespeare intentionally chose to render them neglected and absent, contributing to the perpetuation of a patriarchal hierarchy that positioned men at its apex.

Shakespeare's deliberate treatment of female characters as enigmatic and mysterious aligns with his adherence to traditional gender norms, wherein women's worth and role were restricted and confined. This echoes the

sentiments expressed by William Faulkner, who humorously acknowledged the challenges of writing about women while recognizing their marvelous and wonderful nature.

The presence of anti-women sentiment in Shakespeare's works is not isolated to Hamlet but can be discerned in other plays like King Lear, Merchant of Venice, Othello, among others. This deep-seated aversion towards women, rooted in Greek mythology's tales like Oedipus, reveals a long-standing fear of the feminine and its perceived threat to male social domination.

It is essential to critically reexamine the roles of women in society, both in Shakespeare's time and in contemporary times, to challenge the historical biases that have limited women's agency and representation. By recognizing and questioning the historical animosity towards women, we can foster a more equitable and inclusive society that values and empowers all genders.

Shakespeare's works, including Hamlet, serve as an invitation to confront the complexities of gender representation, encouraging us to read between the lines and uncover the multifaceted truths that underlie the portrayal of women in literature and the arts. By doing so, we honor the past while actively shaping a more enlightened future, where women's voices are heard, celebrated, and accorded their rightful place in the tapestry of human experiences.

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