

## Zeffirelli's Gertrude and Ophelia: The Assertion of Femininity

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Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film production of *Hamlet* is arguably more politically correct than any other version of the play to date. Zeffirelli "enlarges the roles of the women" (Cartmell 219) so that they are almost equal to those of men. Neither the film's predecessors nor its followers empower the play's female characters in the way that Zeffirelli's adaptation does. Compared to Jean Simmons in Lawrence Olivier's 1948 production and Kate Winslet in Kenneth Branagh's 1995 production, actress Helena Bonham-Carter portrays an unconventionally assertive Ophelia. In the same way, Glenn Close adds to the film's sense of feminism, as she portrays an independent, strong Gertrude. Conventionally portrayed as a character that merely reacts to her surroundings, Gertrude plays a vastly more influential role in this adaptation. Though much of the film's feminist quality can be attributed to the skills of the actresses, Zeffirelli is the one who gives Shakespeare's female characters a stage in which they can actively influence their surroundings.

Zeffirelli begins his incorporation of feminism in the film's opening scene, through Close's portrayal of Gertrude. The first diegetic sound that the audience hears is the sound of the Queen sobbing at the sarcophagus of her late husband. The camera focuses on her as she weeps over her husband's body. At the climax of her hysterics, she throws her body over the stone slab as if in surrender to her grief. She then slowly raises her eyes from the body, softening her expression, and meets Claudius's gaze. Hamlet "catches the exchange of glances between the sobbing Gertrude (whose face reads, 'I need to be comforted') and the opportunistic Claudius ('I'm here to comfort')" (Keyishian 77). Though subtle and seemingly inconsequential, this exchange helps to portray Gertrude as "a woman torn between two lovers" (Cartmell 219), impacting the audience's perception of Gertrude. It helps to present Gertrude as an active participant in her marriage to Claudius. She is not the passive, conquered woman that many other productions portray her to be. With this first impression of Gertrude, the audience is more likely to interpret differently her actions later in the play. Furthermore, the fact that the film's first diegetic sounds come from a woman suggests to the audience that, throughout the rest of the film, women will play an especially important role.

In a less subtle way, Zeffirelli adapts the second scene of the play in such a way that Gertrude has a greater influence on the plot than previous adaptations have given her. To accomplish this contemporary portrait of the Queen, Zeffirelli expands the Gertrude-Hamlet relationship, demonstrating Gertrude's influence on the plot. Conventionally, Claudius is present in act 1, scene 2, to persuade Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg and to stay in Elsinore. In Zeffirelli's adaptation, however, Gertrude and Hamlet are alone for this conversation. Zeffirelli rearranges the dialogue in a way that magnifies Gertrude's influence on the male characters around her, such as Hamlet. Claudius attempts to assuage Hamlet's grief over his father's death earlier in the scene, confronting Hamlet's sorrow with cold logic: "But you must know your father lost a father, / That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound in filial obligation for some term / To do obsequious sorrow" (1.2.90-92). His words seem to have little impact on Hamlet, and no one responds to him. Only when Claudius's attempt has failed and he has exited the room does Gertrude reach out to her son, saying, "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark" (1.2.68-69). In Claudius's absence, the sentiment Gertrude conveys in these lines is more intimate. She also emphasizes Claudius's attempt, saying, "Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72-73). Her words, unlike Claudius's, seem to have an effect on Hamlet. Despite its obstinate nature, his response to her demonstrates Gertrude's influence on her son: she is able to elicit a response from him, with the same logic Claudius offers just moments before.

To further demonstrate the depth of Gertrude's and Hamlet's relationship, Zeffirelli places Hamlet alone with his mother when he tries to help her understand the true depth of his grief, saying, "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76). Gertrude then says, "Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. / I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg" (1.2.118-119). Hamlet responds directly to her, intimately looking into her eyes, and the characters share an embrace to manifest the intimacy of the scene. To end the scene, Gertrude, in the epitome of feminism, speaks a line that was in the written play intended for Claudius to speak: "This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet / Sits smiling to my heart" (1.2.123-124). Like the embrace between Gertrude and her son, this line helps to emphasize and outwardly express the ways in which Zeffirelli's Gertrude greatly influences her surroundings. Zeffirelli's rearrangement of this scene leaves the audience to believe that Gertrude is solely responsible for Hamlet's decision to stay in Elsinore.

In an even more obvious act of feminism, Zeffirelli empowers Gertrude by giving her a more aggressive role in act III, scene 4 of the play. Conventionally, Hamlet handles Gertrude in a violent manner, often yanking her by the arm and throwing her onto the bed. In Zeffirelli's adaptation of this scene, however, Gertrude initiates the violence, slapping Hamlet after he says, "And (would it were not so) you are my mother" (3.4.16). The fact that Gertrude catalyzes the altercation is significant. Again, this action is an obvious demonstration of Gertrude's power to assert herself. Though Hamlet handles Gertrude roughly throughout the rest of the scene, pulling her by the chain she wears around her neck, it is significant that Gertrude is the one who initiates the rough play.

As heavily as he emphasizes Gertrude's influence on her surroundings, Zeffirelli emphasizes Ophelia's self assurance in spite of her surroundings. Many productions, such as Olivier's in 1948, present the character of Ophelia as ethereal and fragile. For example, Olivier's Ophelia collapses in tears on a staircase after Hamlet accosts her in the "Get thee to a nunnery" scene. Male characters generally treat her like a child, condescending to her. In Zeffirelli's production, however, Ophelia is never treated in an overly delicate manner. She is often treated as an equal by male characters such as Laertes. In act I, scene 3, Laertes shares a look of amusement with his sister as Polonius gives him cliché and humorous advice for his departure. In the same way, Laertes does not patronize Ophelia earlier in the scene when he gives her direct advice about her relationship with Hamlet. In fact, he sits upon a windowsill for this conversation, so that he is looking up into Ophelia's eyes as he gives his advice.

Similar to Close's Gertrude, Bonham-Carter's Ophelia is more aggressive. In act 1, scene 3, when Polonius has stated his doubt that Hamlet loves Ophelia and is walking away from her, she hurries after him. She then contentiously grabs him by the arm, forcing him to face her, and says, "[He] hath given countenance to his speech, my lord, / With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (112-113). Shortly after this assertion, when Polonius decrees that Ophelia should henceforth refuse Hamlet's affections, Ophelia bitterly accepts: "I shall obey, my lord" (135). As the characters end their conversation on a slight hill in front of the castle, Ophelia assumes a position higher than her father's on the hill (Screenshot A). She literally has the higher ground, even though she submits to her father's decision. Paired with Bonham-Carter's obvious look of contempt while she delivers the line, this positioning of the actors helps the audience to perceive Ophelia as a woman capable of holding her own in a world dominated by men.

Zeffirelli further empowers the character of Ophelia in his adaptation of act III, scene 1. In this scene, Ophelia is aggressive as she insists to Hamlet that he did, in fact, give her the tokens she wishes to return to him. Completely self assured, she confronts him, saying, "My honored lord, you know right well you did, / And with them words of so sweet breath composed / As made the things more rich" (97-99). Bonham-Carter reinforces the strength behind these lines by stepping towards Hamlet instead of shying away from him. Her authoritative behavior takes even Hamlet by surprise, and he momentarily regards her with an intrigued look upon his face. She is not frail or delicate as she continues, saying, "Their perfume lost, / Take these again" (99-100). In fact, as she speaks, her mannerisms further emphasize her composure: She examines the tokens coldly, as if emotionally disengaged from both the gifts and the giver. This representation of Ophelia differs greatly from Olivier's weepy, dainty portrayal of the character. To further establish the character's self-assured presence, Bonham-Carter even shakes her head and rolls her eyes as she places the tokens in Hamlet's hand.

The action that follows in this scene also helps to create the audience's perception of a stronger Ophelia. Though Zeffirelli omits quite a few lines in the scene, from Hamlet as well as from Ophelia, it is significant that he omits Ophelia's line, "I was the more deceived" (3.1.120). With this omission, Ophelia does not reveal the depth to which Hamlet has hurt her. She seems substantially less vulnerable in his presence. To reinforce the image of a less vulnerable female character, Zeffirelli's Ophelia, in comparison to Olivier's, is hardly broken after Hamlet accosts her. She does not collapse to the ground in dramatic sobs; she is still standing when Hamlet makes his exit. Zeffirelli's Ophelia is even strong enough to bend down and retrieve the tokens which Hamlet has so coldly thrown to the ground.

Perhaps the strongest example of Zeffirelli's feminism is the scene in which Ophelia goes mad. Some film adaptations of *Hamlet* use sexuality to demonstrate Ophelia's madness. In Branagh's production, for example, Ophelia lies on her back and thrusts her hips in the air. This sexual portrayal of Ophelia, though shocking, is still essentially passive. Firstly, Ophelia does not interact sexually with another character. Though she performs in the presence of others, she chooses to carry out the act alone. Secondly, the way in which she lies on her back and looks to the air in front of her, as if imagining someone on top of her (Screencap B), suggests to the audience that she is practicing the sexual act of receiving. Zeffirelli's Ophelia, in contrast, is sexually aggressive, almost to the point of assault. The scene opens with a camera on Bonham-Carter as she sneaks across the courtyard to a lone sentry, approaching him with a look of intent upon her face. She then proceeds to run her hand through his hair and touch his face inappropriately. Her focus gradually shifts downward, and she explores his body with her hands, until finally grabbing his belt in a sexually suggestive way (Screencap C). Her "assault upon [the] boyish sentry who must stand to attention even as she masturbates his sword belt" (Rutter 256-7) is so vulgar and offensive that the sentry is too shocked to react. This actively sexual behavior differs greatly from Winslet's portrayal of Ophelia. Bonham-Carter's actions are not at all passive. The act of seeking a partner with whom she can act on her sexual impulse demonstrates to the audience her aggressive personality.

Zeffirelli is not introducing feminism in *Hamlet* as a new concept; he simply emphasizes and enhances the play's preexisting feminine influence. He incorporates his interpretation of Ophelia and the Queen by rearranging dialogue, manipulating characters' relationships, and deliberately staging scenes, in ways that invigorate the characters and magnify their strengths. Close and Bonham-Carter also do their parts to contribute to the film's feminist quality, emphasizing characteristics in Gertrude and Ophelia that actresses typically have never been able to emphasize. Through Zeffirelli's interpretation of the play, as well as through Close's and Bonham-Carter's interpretations of their roles, the audience is able to see Gertrude, Ophelia, and the feminine influence in *Hamlet*, in a new light.

Screencap A: Bonham-Carter, as Ophelia, takes the high ground when Polonius forbids her to accept Hamlet's affections.



Screencap B: Winslet portrays a vulgar yet passive Ophelia.



Screencap C: Bonham-Carter portrays a sexually aggressive Ophelia.



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