

The Power of Women In Hamlet

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In an action-riddled rendition of William Shakespeare's infamous tragedy *Hamlet*, Franco Zeffirelli challenges past conventions and gives to his audience a special twist on the classic tale, giving more importance to the women in the film. Rather than the simpering, clueless women of the 1948 film done by Laurence Olivier, this version brings to the stage women that are more in control of the men around them. In her article, "Franco Zeffirelli and Shakespeare," Deborah Cartmell confronts this shift of female representation in the Zeffirelli and Olivier *Hamlet* films. According to Cartmell, it is apparent that Zeffirelli explores new avenues for the *Hamlet* women, creating a more equal female role in the unfurling tragedy of Denmark. Cartmell's suggestion of the "prominence of women," (Cartmell 219), is one that can be soundly formed through close examination of the female roles in this particular adaptation of the play. Beyond other films, Zeffirelli manages to create a version that bestows importance on the women. Indeed, women gain confidence and status, and claim a new authority in this particular version of the story of *Hamlet*.

Zeffirelli casts Helena Bonham-Carter as his angel-faced Ophelia. Her pale face dramatically contrasts with her dark eyes and plaited brown hair – a look that is quite different than other Ophelias, such as Olivier's bright-eyed platinum blonde choice. Her striking looks urge the viewer to give Ophelia a second glance, and consider the quiet intelligence in her eyes. This Ophelia, though notably thinner and more frail than others before her, appeals to a more stubborn type of woman. The viewer is first introduced to her as she converses with her brother Laertes previous to his departure for France. Laertes questions his young sister about the Lord Hamlet, advising against any romantic feelings; all the while, Ophelia dismisses his words through her body language. She laughs at his admonishing judgment, and paces as she half-listens to what he tells her. This Ophelia fiddles with the stray threads on the weaving loom, and fidgets with her hands, avoiding her brother's opinions. Moreover, Ophelia refuses to look Laertes in the eye; she glances down, up, even out a window to evade the negative things she doesn't want to hear about Hamlet. Although she hears him, she bites her lip absentmindedly thinks of other things as Laertes beseeches her not to pursue the affections of Hamlet. This sort of mini-rebellion is in itself an initial signifier of Ophelia's strength and depth of character, and impels the viewer to consider Ophelia with more regard throughout the film.

Zeffirelli's Ophelia continues in her tenacious spirit as she confronts the same subject with her father, Polonius. She protests against him, persists in following him, and retorts to every excuse he gives her to defend the infatuation she has for the prince. Further than her outward defiance, Zeffirelli's Ophelia is very much an internalizing character as well. At the end of this scene as she enters the castle with Polonius, she declares to her father, "I shall obey, my lord." Contrary to the words spoken, however, are her face and her tone. She speaks the word obey, yet she says it almost angrily, while her face portrays something perilously close to insubordination and nothing of submission. In her next appearance, Ophelia walks in on Hamlet, in his first attempt at fake insanity, and seems almost wickedly delighted to find herself in his company, alone. Her smirk is flirtatious, and she dominates the scene as she closes the gap between them, searching his strange face for reasons unfound to explain his sudden change of mood. Most importantly, Zeffirelli stages Polonius to witness this exchange from an above landing in the room. This omits Ophelia's direct account, and leaves the viewer to believe that Ophelia, in her quiet defiance, may not have mentioned the event at all to her father, would he not have seen it for himself. This was a chance that Zeffirelli took to delete some of Ophelia's foolish, dramatic ways and present her as a self-aware woman capable of holding a secret.

Zeffirelli's woman also possesses a bit of cheek and strength that others lack. While directors, such as Olivier, stage their Ophelia to collapse, destroyed by Hamlet's exclamation, "Get thee to a nunnery," the Ophelia of Zeffirelli's film stands firm, staring ahead and taking her dismissal head-on. As Cartmell asserts, "although hurt, she is not destroyed by Hamlet's violent rejection," (Cartmell 219). She accepts what is thrown at her, either denial of love, or pointed remarks; during the play within a play, Ophelia is seen rolling her eyes at Hamlet while he lays his head in her lap making crude comments.

Ophelia's madness in Zeffirelli's film, although the lowest point for Ophelia, is yet an indicator of her feminine strength. The viewer looks on as she crawls and creeps up the stone steps on white, bare feet. Her hair is a tangled mass, her clothes are tattered and wet, and yet through her madness, the audience detects an anger. Though obviously insane, Ophelia's face is scrunched, twitchy, and tone threatening, giving her power. Rather than seeming helpless and distraught, she adopts a crazy rage. The near molestation of the court sentry is rough, almost violent, and Ophelia finds force through her sexual power as well as the strength of her anger. As Gulsen Sayin Teker writes in his essay, "Empowered by Madness: Ophelia in the Films of Kozintsev, Zeffirelli, and Branagh," Bonham-Carter gives a special twist on Ophelia. He emphasizes, "Her innocence is mixed with intelligence, keen perception, and erotic awareness," (Teker 116). This breakthrough for Ophelia's character in Zeffirelli's film is one that sets her apart, one that gives her more of an intriguing role, and more feminine strength in this version of *Hamlet*.

More than Ophelia, it is the Queen's character that has the greatest transformation, the greatest show of power from the previous interpretations to this of Zeffirelli's. Zeffirelli's film begins with a non-existent scene in the written play – the funeral of King Hamlet is presented. This blatant addition is initially peculiar, yet serves an infinitely important purpose: to introduce the character of Queen Gertrude, and to establish the place of power she maintains throughout the film. The audience is taken down to the depths of a tomb, behind stone columns and through shadowy spaces to behold the corpse of the King. The first figure to come forward is that of the Queen, channeled by Glenn Close, draped in folds and veils of black, her pale skin and pale hair a beautiful contrast. Concern swamps her face while her lip quivers in her attempt to hold back tears. The viewer watches as Gertrude wars an inward battle, losing as she gives in to grief, clutching at Polonius's hands. All the while, the camera cuts back to Claudius's face, grim and aggressive, his eyes dark caves beneath his brow. As Hamlet enters, the viewer sees him step aside to comfort his mother while the stone slab is placed over the coffin. Here the music swells, climbing in great, sinister steps, climaxing as Claudius places the sword on the stone, and ultimately, as Gertrude throws herself against it, making herself the figure of attention, the center of the scene. Zeffirelli allows the camera to cut to Hamlet's face, his brooding eyes locked on his mother. Beyond expressing grief, Zeffirelli manages to determine a particular relationship between mother and son. Hamlet stands, tied to his mother, unable to dispel her tears and visibly lost himself as to how to help her. This frustration of how to handle Gertrude, and his submission to her wants is only touched on here, a brilliant hint for the rest of the film.

Along with establishing this power over Hamlet, Zeffirelli reveals his Gertrude to have power over another man, the dark, menacing figure opposite her by the dead body, Claudius. She weeps in a seemingly inconsolable manner, face down against the stone. As the music shifts, however, the viewer hears strains of violins, stroking change into the scene. The Queen raises her head, and the audience captures the moment of the glance exchanged between her and grim Claudius. Her eyes shift, expressing almost a hopeful gleam, just as the camera cuts to the wedding celebration of the two. This addition allows the viewer to realize Gertrude's willingness, and perhaps instigation, for her second marriage. The staging in this particular frame is essentially important also. Gertrude is situated at the feet of the dead King, while Claudius is at the head. They are positioned opposite one another with only one thing separating them: King Hamlet. By this point, however, he is dead, and is no longer a boundary between his wife and his brother. In the immediate scene following, this limitation is gone, and as nothing stands between them, Gertrude and Claudius are wed.

This opening scene also makes available to the audience proof of Gertrude's effect on Claudius. In the crypt, he scowls and looms menacingly; after the wedding, however, Claudius appears almost jolly, and certainly more carefree. It is Gertrude's influence, her glowing happiness in the new marriage, and her ultimate power over men that is unique to Zeffirelli's film, which makes this opening scene one of utmost importance, despite its lacking in the original play.

Beyond the beginning, Gertrude continually displays her strength and power throughout the film. When the Queen finds Hamlet in the study alone, she dismisses Claudius with her eyes – she commands the room without words and moves the men around her like pawns in order to have a private moment with her son. Despite Hamlet's sullen attitude, Gertrude has only to smile wittingly and whisper in his ear to have him submitting to her wishes. He even falls to his knees at her feet, hugging her body close to him in a compliant, obedient motion that visually presents Gertrude in the dominant position in the relationship.

The pair touch and kiss often in Zeffirelli's film. Before departing the study, Gertrude kisses Hamlet on the mouth, slightly lingering, only to rush off to embrace and kiss Claudius. During the bedroom scene, Hamlet confronts his mother with his knowledge of the late King's death. He pulls and pushes Gertrude on her bed, thrusting against her body simulating sexual activities between her and the murderous Claudius. Hamlet screams his anger, seemingly uncontrollable in his madness of fury; yet, as Gertrude grabs his face amid the violent yelling in a zealous kiss, the viewer's ears are slashed in sudden silence. Gertrude is able to stifle Hamlet's anger through her embrace, cutting off his words and bringing an end to his extreme violence.

Whether she is controlling or ignoring the men around her, Zeffirelli's Gertrude defies all other standards for *Hamlet's* Queen, and blazes a new path for feminine roles. Her brief scene with Polonius alone shows her character strength; as the old man blabbers on about Hamlet, Gertrude sits in a throne-like chair, assuming authority and control already, and although thoughtful, rolls her eyes at Polonius and his bumbling. She puts up with his nonsense, and in the end, walks away from him when she has heard enough, taking control of the situation and effectively ending the conversation as she pleased.

The Queen's possession of control is displayed up until her death. At the end of Zeffirelli's film, Gertrude and Hamlet exchange smiles and a wink before the duel, an otherwise flirtatious move here shown between a mother and a son. And as she reaches for her son in her death throes, Gertrude once again reminds the audience of their unique relationship, providing evidence of a stronger relationship, a more powerful influence of Gertrude over Hamlet, than any other film has shown. As James Simmons writes in his essay, "In the Rank Sweat of an Enseamed Bed: Sexual Aberration and the Paradigmatic Screen Hamlets," Close brings something extra to her role that makes it extraordinary. He declares that her portrayal of Shakespeare's Gertrude, "elevates her character to a whole new level of complexity," (Simmons 116). With Zeffirelli's direction, this Gertrude is certainly more complex with a multifaceted personality that is unparalleled in any other version of *Hamlet*.

Franco Zeffirelli most assuredly presents a very distinctive view on Gertrude and Ophelia in his 1990 film *Hamlet*. Rather than a fluttery Queen, or oblivious Ophelia like some others, Zeffirelli gives his women stronger, more powerful qualities that grant them more equal, pivotal roles than before. Deborah Cartmell affirms that Zeffirelli "enlarges the roles of the women," (Cartmell 219). Beyond enlarging, Zeffirelli significantly develops his female characters. Armed with strength of character, and even persuasion, the women in Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* exhibit a growth of feminine power that no other interpretation allows them to possess, and give an interesting twist on the timeless tale of the tragedy of revenge.

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