Ophelia, Gertrude, and Regicide - Hamlet II: Crash Course Literature 204

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we continue our discussion of Hamlet.

John from the past: "Mr. Green, Mr. Green! I've figured it out already. Hamlet has an Oedipus complex, that explains everything."

No, no, no, no, no, Me From the Past, as we've already learned, not even Oedipus had an Oedipus complex, although your fascination with it is starting to freak me out a little. And while you can read Hamlet as being entirely about sex sex sex sex sex sex, you don't have to. I'll give you this though Me From the Past, whether or not Hamlet wants to sleep with his mother, he definitely has girl troubles.

(Intro)

So Hamlet's pretty vicious to the women in this play. He orders Ophelia for instance to "get thee to a nunnery" and he tells his mother Gertrude, "frailty, thy name is woman" even though Hamlet isn't terribly robust, as you may have noticed. Now there's been some backlash to us discussing gender dynamics in literature, but this is a really important contemporary approach to the study of literature. It's not the only one, it's not the only one that we do here, but it is one that matters.

So a basic reading of Hamlet would look like this: Claudius has and uses power, Hamlet has power but mostly chooses not to use it, Polonius has less power than he imagines himself to have, and Ophelia and Gertrude have no power. Right? Yeah... not exactly. Let's go to the thought bubble.

So in painting there's a tradition of depicting Ophelia as a tragic, romantic, completely powerless heroine, following the mythology created by Gertrude when she describes Ophelia's death in extensive detail - how she fell in the weeping brook, her clothes spread wide and mermaid like, awhile they bore her up till that her garments, heavy with their drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death. Did Gertrude actually see this? Probably not. And if she did, why didn't she try to save Ophelia instead of coming up with a lovely simile about how much she looks like a mermaid while she drowns?

Gertrude's description makes Ophelia's death sound like an accident: a branch broke and she plunged helplessly into the water. It could have happened to anyone hanging out on a river bank wearing lots of layers, but pretty much everyone else accepts Ophelia's death as a deliberate suicide caused by her madness, so that raises the question: what kind of agency did she have since she clearly had some, and how did she use it, and also, what caused her madness?

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So, before Hamlet escapes into madness, he's in a difficult spot. He's heir to a throne that should be his already, son to a mother he no longer trusts, nephew to the guy who possibly killed his dad, well, Ophelia's in a pretty tight spot, too. I mean, Ophelia's father has been murdered by Hamlet, who used to be in love with her, and is now shouting at her about nunneries and then making weird sexual banter and then going off to sea. It's like if that guy who you aren't totally sure if he's your boyfriend kills your dad and then still sort of wanted to be your boyfriend but only sometimes. We've all been there.

In Act Two, Polonius says of Hamlet, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't", and let's not overlook the method in Ophelia's madness, like toward the end of Act Four, she hands out flowers she has collected to Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes. These flowers each have meanings that would be known to the Elizabethan audience, who were the kind of people who liked their bouquets to contain secret codes.

"There's fennel for you, and columbines," says Ophelia, presumably to Gertrude as fennel signified flattery and columbines, marital infidelity. She also hands out rue, which signified repentance, and mentions that the violets, associated with faithfulness, quote, "withered all when my father died."

This is Ophelia at her most deliciously subversive, delivering her own form of judgment, speaking out against corruption and injustice and doing it in her own particularly feminine way, behind the mask of seeming madness. So while Hamlet's off on some pirate ship, giving yet more soliloquies about his indecisiveness, Ophelia is serving her own beliefs about right and wrong and life and death, and she's doing it in a way that's clear. I mean, at least, it would be clear to Elizabethans.

But then she tragically decides to inflict this judgment upon her own body, viewing her death as a way to free herself from Elsinore's depravity and depression.

Quick personal side note: I think that is a terrible decision and a poor use of Ophelia's agency, as bad as her use of the flowers is good, suicide is a permanent to a temporary problem, even in Ophelia's case.

So there's very popular reading of Hamlet that Ophelia's suicide is an assertive choice, the only choice she really can make, but in fact, the flowers show that she can also make other choices. Now, of course, those choices might have resulted in her death anyway, but the choice was there.

All that noted, there's no question that while Hamlet is stuffed between "to be or not to be", Ophelia actively chooses not to be - she makes her peace with death, and she does it a whole act before Hamlet does.

So without Ophelia, we're left with the other woman in the play: Queen Gertrude. Gertrude's quickie marriage to Claudius forces Hamlet to think a lot more than you would want to about his mother's sexuality. Or maybe it's exactly as much as you want to. Hamlet sees Gertrude's hook up with Claudius as a betrayal of his father, but also of Hamlet himself, because it deprives him of the throne.

So it's not fair to say that Gertrude has no power or agency - she has the one vote in the election for who becomes king. But does her choice make Gertrude a traitor? I mean, is she complicit in her husband's murder, or is she just another victim of Claudius' sweet, sweet, poisonous lies?

And this is for the Oedipal reading comes in, like, is Hamlet angry at Claudius because Claudius has done what Hamlet always secretly wanted to do? You know, kill the father, marry the mother, become king?

And he does focus pretty intently on Gertrude's quote "incestuous sheets" but most of the time he's hesitating to kill Claudius, it's becomes he doesn't wanna become a murderer, not because of anything about what's happening between the sheets.

For a character with not that many lines, Gertrude is very interesting. Like, is her ultimate loyalty to Hamlet or to Claudius? Shakespeare presses this idea in the duel scene when Gertrude either inadvertently or on purpose saves Hamlet's life, if only for like a minute.

Gertrude reaches for Hamlet's poisoned cups, and Claudius orders her not to drink, but her only response is "I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me." Is she just thirsty, or is that a conscious choice? In her final moments, is she showing Hamlet where her real allegiance

lies? Now, of course, Shakespeare meant for this to be ambiguous, but her final line is "O, my dear Hamlet," not "O, my dear Claudius".

Now, both Gertrude and Ophelia's defiance of authority ultimately results in their suicides, and I want to underscore that I don't think suicide is heroic, but the most interesting discussion question in my high school question is, "which of these characters, in hamlet, is the most heroic?"

I think that you can make a case for almost anyone, except for Polonius, and of course, Claudius. But there's certainly a case to be made for Gertrude or Ophelia. Anyway, this leads us to the question of which heroism always involves taking heroic action. Certainly, Hamlet's a big fan of action. I mean, not in his own life, but as an idea.

I mean, he describes man as "in action how like an angel", but then he shows that this image of angelic man is inaccessible to him, even repellent, saying "and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

And then, of course, smack dab in the middle of the play, Hamlet lectures the traveling players about how best to act. And then Hamlet doesn't act for scene after scene after scene, except when he stabs Polonius, who while annoying, is innocent. But is this indecision meant to be seen as heroic, like, is Hamlet a weak and wishy washy guy for wasting all his time on investigations, or is it in fact kind of heroic to back check information that you get from a ghost before killing someone.

Amleth, the inspiration for the tragedy, acts decisively and he's certainly seen as a hero, but it's much more complicated in Shakespeare's play. For one thing, as we've seen, ghosts were not necessarily to be trusted.

Oh, a ghost is moving my desk, it must be time for the open letter. No, no, no, no, no. You? No. You are not real. You are not a ghost. You are a digital representation created by Thought Cafe, I am not giving you an open letter, moving along.

Sorry, I'm scared of ghosts. Even though they aren't real; they definitely aren't real. Anyway, there's also the fact that killing a king, even if that king is a usurper, was generally seen as like, not a fantastic idea. Except when it came to Macbeth.

I mean, kings were seen to rule by divine right, so offing one was an insult to God, also, it was in Hamlet's best interest to keep that idea around so that, you know, no one would off him if he became king.

So maybe it's a good thing that Hamlet doesn't take murder lightly. Well, except for when he kills Polonius for the unforgivable sin of hiding behind curtains.

So what finally turns Hamlet into an actor? Maybe pirates, maybe nothing. Many critics feel that it's a different Hamlet who shows up in the fifth act, one who has undergone a sea change, literally, and now feels less conflicted about his own mortality.

But it's not like the play immediately becomes a John Claude Van Damme movie, I mean, Hamlet tells Horatio, "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now." That doesn't sound like a guy who's about to go on a slaughtering spree.

When Hamlet does act, it's at the last possible moment, killing Claudius only because he has learned that Claudius was planning to kill him, Gertrude, and Laertes. At a certain point all that stuff about mortal and divine justice and the perpetual cycle of violence goes out the window, and you think, "Hey, maybe I should just kill this multiple murderer."

But then, of course, in doing so, you re-raise all those questions about mortal and divine justice and the perpetual cycle of violence, GAHHH I LOVE SHAKESPEARE!

The one thing you can say about Hamlet is that once he starts to take action, he really takes it: he stabs Claudius with the poisoned swords and forces him to drink from the poisoned cups, killing him twice. And he insults Claudius, calling him "Thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane", which in Elizabethan terms is quite the burn.

But taking action doesn't really resolve or integrate Hamlet's character, as he dies, Hamlet charges Horatio with telling his story, as though only in death will Horatio to make a coherent narrative out of all his delay and wavering and ambivalence. If it's revenge that made the original Amleth famous, that's not what keeps drawing us back to Shakespeare's play; it's Hamlet's inaction rather than his action that makes us pay attention.

The soliloquies in which he weighs his options and tries to decide whether he will direct the course of his life or let fate determine it teaches us something about what it means to be human - to have a conscious, to make difficult decisions in our own lives.

Or not make them. Inaction, as Hamlet shows us, is its own kind of action. Which kind of action is heroic? I don't know. Tell me what you think in comments. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

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