Hamlet’s Mother

BALDWIN MAXWELL

In an article entitled “The Character of Hamlet’s Mother” (Shakespeare Quarterly, VIII (1957), 201-206), Miss Carolyn Heilbrun expressed strong disagreement with what had been the generally accepted estimate of Queen Gertrude. Seemingly unaware of the essay by Professor Draper, the Queen’s most ardent defender, Miss Heilbrun wrote that “critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet’s word ‘frailty’ as applying to [Gertrude’s] whole personality, and have seen in her . . . a character of which weakness and lack of depth and rigorous intelligence are the entire explanation” (p. 201). She, as had Professor Draper, rejected almost in toto the views of such critics as A. C. Bradley, Miss Agnes Mackenzie, H. Granville-Barker, and others who had declared the Queen “weak”, “neutral”, or “little more than a puppet”.

Professor Draper, who thought Gertrude innocent of adultery prior to King Hamlet’s death, not only denied her weakness but excused her hasty and incestuous marriage as politically necessary because of a national crisis, “a marriage more of convenience than of love” (p. 121). To him the Queen appeared “dignified, gracious, and resourceful”, one who “as a wife, as a mother, as a queen . . . seems to approximate, if not the Elizabethan ideal, at least the Elizabethan norm”. She is, he insisted, “no slave to lust” (pp. 123, 126). It is only on this last point that Miss Heilbrun and Professor Draper markedly disagreed. Although persuaded that Gertrude was innocent of adultery prior to the elder Hamlet’s death, Miss Heilbrun argued that her marriage to Claudius was brought about not by a need to settle a national crisis, not by the witchcraft of Claudius’ wit, but by lust alone, “the need of sexual passion” in her widowhood. Apart from this passion, the Queen is, Miss Heilbrun believed, a "strong-


2 To Bradley “The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman. . . . But she had a soft animal nature, and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy . . . . The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humoured sensual fashion” (Shakespearean Tragedy, London: Macmillan, 1929, p. 167).

Miss Mackenzie follows Bradley but is more severe. To her Gertrude is “simply . . . stupid, coarse, ["cheap"] and shallow”. “She has”, continued Miss Mackenzie, “the qualities of a pleasant animal—docility, kindliness, affection for her offspring, a courage in defence of her mate. She would have made a very lovable cat or dog” (The Women in Shakespeare’s Plays, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1924, pp. 202, 224).

Granville-Barker was more kind. He saw Gertrude as “a woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it . . . . She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the play’s action. She moves throughout in Claudius’ shadow; he holds her as he had won her, by the witchcraft of his wit” (Prefaces to Shakespeare, 3rd Series, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1937, p. 284).
minded, intelligent, succinct, and ... sensible woman”, who is, except for her
description of Ophelia’s death, “concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for
seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes” (pp. 202-203).

This view of the Queen’s character is at such variance with that previously
current that one may wish to reexamine her appearances in the play, scene by
scene, for light upon the impression Shakespeare sought to create. Little time
is needed to do so, for however important the part of the Queen in the story of
Hamlet, her role in the play is definitely subordinate. She appears in ten of the
play’s twenty scenes, but in those ten scenes she speaks fewer lines than does
Ophelia, who appears in only five; and, unlike Ophelia, the Queen is never the
central or dominant figure on the stage. She speaks but one brief aside and never
the concluding line of a scene. To be sure, a gifted actress may, by clever stage
business and a gracious manner, provide for the role an illusion of importance;
but this importance is not supported by the lines she speaks and presumably
was not purposed by Shakespeare.

Practically all recent critics have agreed that Gertrude was not only innocent
of complicity in the murder of her first husband but wholly unaware of it.
That she was, however, guilty of an “o’erhasty [second] marriage”, she herself
testifies. Nor is it permissible to see that marriage as other than incestuous. The
one sin of which the Queen has been accused but of which her guilt may be
debatable is that she had been Claudius’ mistress while the elder Hamlet was
alive.

When in I. ii, the Queen appears on stage for the first time, the audience
has heard nothing whatsoever about her. It is prejudiced neither in her favor
nor against her. She doubtless enters on the arm of King Claudius, who directs
his ingratiating smile towards her during part of the remarkable speech with
which the scene opens and from which we learn that he, having shortly before
lost a brother, has recently taken to wife his brother’s widow. Incest, to be sure—
a horrible sin in the eyes of both church and state. But with such consummate
skill has the King’s speech been phrased that all on the crowded stage—or at
least all but one—show neither shock nor disapproval. As a result the audience
may naturally assume that the general satisfaction should outweigh the dis-
pleasure of one individual, and, in the absence of other details, accept the unusual
marriage—at least for the time being—as an act which may well be shown to be
both wise and—under the circumstances—permissible.

After the King has explained the present situation and expressed “For all,
our thanks”, the Queen, apart perhaps from a smile, offers no word of thanks
for herself. She remains silent as the King instructs the departing ambassadors
and questions Laertes and Polonius on the former’s desire to return to France.
Gertrude is the last to speak. Upon Hamlet’s bitter punning reply to the King,

Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun,

the Queen makes her first speech—six lines, one of the three longest she speaks
in the entire play. She urges Hamlet to “look like a friend on Denmark”, to
cease mourning for his father since

Thou know’st ’tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
HAMLET’S MOTHER

That she misunderstands Hamlet’s reply to her cliché, “Ay madam, it is common”, is shown by her then asking

If it be,
   Why seems it so particular with thee?—

indicative not only that she has herself ceased to mourn her late husband’s death but as well that she completely fails to understand her son. After Hamlet’s answer, the King, his composure recovered, quickly speaks thirty-one lines, ending with the wish that Hamlet remain at Elsinore. This wish the Queen now seconds in her third and last speech of the scene:

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.
I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.

Nine lines later all exeunt save Hamlet.

Such is the Queen’s part on her first appearance. She speaks slightly over nine lines in her three speeches—nine lines to the King’s ninety-four. Her speeches are short but hardly seem more “concise and pithy” than speech in dramatic verse normally is. Nor do they, composed as they are of a cliché, a misunderstanding, and an echo, encourage the view that she is a “resourceful”, “strong-minded” woman, “with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes”. Perhaps, too, her obedient rising at the King’s “Madam, come”, suggests her domination by him. Such a suggestion is supported by her leaving the stage in three later scenes upon similar words from the King (“Come, Gertrude”, IV. i; “Let’s follow, Gertrude”, IV. vii; “Sweet Gertrude, leave us”, III. i) and by her only once speaking as she makes her exit.

Such is our introduction to Queen Gertrude. So much do we know about her when Hamlet later in the scene, in his first soliloquy, expresses his disgust that his mother

A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father’s body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer—married with mine uncle,
My father’s brother. . .

O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

That unusual marriage, upon which we had earlier in the scene passed no verdict, we now begin to question. But Hamlet is only one; the court as a whole had seemed neither to disapprove of the marriage nor to condemn its haste. Yet Hamlet’s view, as we are soon to learn, is not peculiar to him, does not spring from thwarted ambition or from an excess of filial affection for his mother. Before we again see Queen Gertrude we are to hear another witness, one eminently qualified to judge her. Three scenes later the Ghost of the dead king is to inform Hamlet that his uncle,

. . . that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
Surely we are not now likely to attribute Gertrude's quietness during her earlier appearance either to remorse for her o'erhasty marriage or to an awareness that her former husband was to her present as "Hyperion to a satyr".

But, one may ask, is the Ghost a wholly disinterested witness? Are we to accept everything he relates? Does he really know whereof he speaks? To the accuracy of his knowledge of the present and the future, I must return later, but I think it can hardly be contested that we are to assume that he has, from his vantage point beyond the grave, learned specifically all that concerned his murder. He was asleep when the poison was poured into his ear, and the dumb-show of the play-within-the-play—though that at best is only Hamlet's interpretation of what the Ghost had revealed—does not show him as awakening before he died. Yet, be it noted, the Ghost reveals not only the identity of the murderer and the instant effect which the poison had upon him but, even more remarkable, the very poison used—the "juice of cursed hebona". Further, the King's reaction to the play-within-the-play confirms the Ghost's account of the murder in every detail. Must we not assume, therefore, that every other revelation of the past which the Ghost gives is equally accurate: that Claudius,

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts
... won to his shameful lust
The will of [the] most seeming-virtuous queen.

Miss Heilbrun, who thinks Gertrude had not been Claudius' mistress, denies that Claudius had won her by the witchcraft of his wit. The real reason Gertrude had entered upon her hasty second marriage, Miss Heilbrun claimed, was given by the Ghost later in the same speech:

But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.

But if we accept as true one part of the Ghost's speech, must we not accept the other also? And do not the last three lines quoted above suggest a violation of the marriage vows? That they were intended to do so is evidenced by the Ghost's having protested in the same speech, in lines immediately preceding, that his

...love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage;

and that Hamlet understood the Ghost's words as indicating Gertrude's adultery is shown by his charging her in the Closet Scene with
HAMLET'S MOTHER

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
... makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths.

So much, then, do we learn of Gertrude in Act I. On these lines must be based the original impression Shakespeare wished to give us. It is interesting and, I suspect, significant that a very large part of what we have so far learned of Gertrude and Claudius represents modification or elaboration by Shakespeare of what is found in Belleforest's account. There, of course, Gertrude is neither weak nor neutral. Although she is not said to have participated in planning the murder of her husband, she was an accomplice after the murder, for she did not deny her lover's claim that it was in defence of her that he had slain his brother. Where, asked Belleforest, would one find "a more wicked and bold woman?" Such a question would never be asked by one writing of the Gertrude of the play. Her character Shakespeare has decidedly softened, even though in the play she appears guilty on every count cited by Belleforest except that of giving support to a false account of her husband's slaying. Shakespeare has softened her character not only by making her ignorant of the murder of her husband but by elaborating, in a way most effective upon the stage, that artful craft of Claudius as reported in Belleforest's account. There the murderer "covered his boldnesse and wicked practise with so great subtiltie and policie, and under the vaile of meere simplicitie ... that his sinne found excuse among the common people, and of the nobilitie was esteemed for justice". Claudius' persuasive cunning is further suggested by Belleforest's observing that Gertrude, "as soone as she once gave eare to [her husband's brother], forgot both the ranke she helde ... and the dutie of an honest wife". To portray this smooth persuasiveness and subtle craft the dramatist introduced a brilliant dramatic touch for which there is no suggestion in Belleforest—the ingratiating smiling which leads Hamlet to declare Claudius a "smiling damned villain", and to cry out:

My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.

So much for Act I. The Queen next appears in II.ii. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been summoned to spy upon Hamlet, and Gertrude's first two speeches merely echo in fewer words the welcome given them by the King. With one exception her five remaining speeches in this scene are of one line or less, most of them designed to break and give a semblance of dialogue to Polonius' artful narration. The one exception is a speech of two lines in reply to the King's reporting to her that Polonius claims to have found

The head and source of all your son's distemper.

The Queen replies:

I doubt it is no other but the main,
His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.

8 Quoted from Furness, Hamlet (Variorum ed.), II, 93-94.
This speech, which some critics (mistakenly, I think) have seen as evidence that the Queen's conscience is already troubled, Miss Heilbrun pronounced "concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous" (p. 203). One could the more readily agree with her had Gertrude omitted the word "o'erhasty". When the King first announced his marriage to his brother's widow, he passed quickly on to important affairs of state, but since then we have heard the incestuous nature of that marriage emphasized by both Hamlet and the Ghost. Are we to assume from her mentioning only the hastiness of their marriage—a censurable indiscretion perhaps but no mortal sin—that Gertrude failed to realize that her marriage to Claudius, no matter when performed, must bear the graver stain of incest? As she is at the time alone with the King, I think we must so assume. She hardly reveals here "a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". But how can she have been so blind to the true nature of her marriage? The only explanation would seem to be that she is blinded by the traitorous gifts of Claudius, by the witchcraft of his wit. She thinks as he directs, acts as he wishes.

The next scene in which the Queen appears is III. ii—the play scene. Here she is on stage for 187 lines and speaks a total of two and one half lines. When to her first speech, "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me", Hamlet replies that he prefers to sit by Ophelia, the Queen is silent until 127 lines later, when, to emphasize the purport of such lines as "None wed the second but who killed the first", Hamlet asks, "Madam, how like you this play?" She answers simply, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks"—a speech which need not suggest stupidity, for she, unlike us, has not heard the ghost and knows not what is in Hamlet's mind; but unless we are to think of her as an artful villainess indeed, the simplicity of her reply is enough to urge her complete innocence of any participation in the murder. She now follows the play intently, saying nothing more until, when the frightened King rises, she anxiously enquires "How fares my lord?" In this scene then, aside from the first clear indication that Gertrude has been no accomplice in the murder, we see in her just what we see in her in other scenes—her love for her son, her devoted concern for Claudius, and her remarkable quietness, with long periods of silence.

It is when she next appears, in III. iv—the so-called Closet Scene—that the Queen has her biggest part. The scene opens with Polonius' hiding himself behind the arras that he may overhear the interview between mother and son—an interview in which the Queen has promised to "be round with him" in the hope of discovering the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. The scheme had been conceived by Polonius and suggested to Claudius in II. ii, when Gertrude was not on stage. We do not witness the King's persuading the Queen to assist in this eavesdropping upon her son, but that she had received specific instructions on how the interview should be conducted is brought out in her conversation with Polonius before Hamlet enters:

Polonius: 'A will come straight. Look you lay home to him. Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with, And that your grace hath screened and stood between Much heat and him. I'll silence me even here. Pray you be round with him. . . .
Queen: I'll warrant you; fear me not.
The Queen had consented to these “lawful espials”, as she had consented earlier when Ophelia had been used as a decoy, probably both because she is hopeful that such a scheme may indeed unearth the secret of Hamlet’s strange behavior and because the stronger Claudius is able always to dominate her will and persuade her to serve his purpose. That this second explanation is sound is, I believe, shown by a departure which Shakespeare here makes from the account of the Closet Scene as related by Belleforest. In Belleforest the King and his councillor, without taking the Queen into their confidence, arrange for the councillor to secrete himself where he may overhear mother and son; the Queen not only has no part in planning the interview, but does not suspect the presence of the eavesdropper until he is discovered by the crafty and suspicious Hamlet’s beating his arms upon the hangings. By this change in the Queen’s part from that of an unwitting participant to that of an active accomplice Shakespeare seems to emphasize the extent to which Claudius dominates her and uses her as his tool.

The Queen begins the closet interview with bluster and some confidence. She has apparently been well briefed as to what she shall say. But when Hamlet proves recalcitrant, when in an ugly mood he assumes the offensive and by so doing throws her out of the part she has been coached to play, she is for a brief moment bold and stubborn. “What have I done?” she cries:

What have I done, that thou dar’st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?

But as Hamlet becomes more specific in his charges, Gertrude has neither the strength nor the inclination to bluster it further. She appears, indeed, stricken in conscience:

O Hamlet, speak no more,
Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grainèd spots
As will not leave their tinct.

And again,

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

Although in this scene the Queen has more speeches and more lines than she has in any other scene, she is throughout overshadowed by Hamlet. In the same number of speeches he speaks four times as many lines as does she. Of her twenty-four speeches, thirteen—more than half—are one line or less, and four others are less than two lines.

Some of her speeches invite comment. Miss Mackenzie has noted that Gertrude sees her penitence not as the consequence of her own actions but rather as a result of Hamlet’s harsh words to her:

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

Second, it is important to note that the question which she, contrite, puzzled, and helpless, addresses to Hamlet as he prepares to leave, “What shall I do?”, illustrates the lack of initiative and independence which mark her throughout. Too weak to determine any procedure for herself, she must rely upon others for guidance in every action.

More puzzling is the Queen’s last speech in the scene—a reply to Hamlet’s
I must to England, you know that?

Ger. Alack,
I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.

No one has ever questioned Gertrude's devotion to her son, although in urging him earlier to "stay with us, go not to Wittenberg", she may have spoken the instructions of Claudius as well as her motherly affection. It is impossible that by "I had forgot" she could have meant other than that the many unhappy events of the evening had crowded out of her mind the realization that Hamlet was to be sent to England. But the King's decision that he be sent away she had apparently accepted without protest as one accustomed to accepting without question what others decide for her.

In Belleforest's account the Queen, although she never appears after the Closet Scene, is definitely and actively an ally of her son, working in his absence to facilitate his revenge. In Shakespeare, although she protests to Hamlet:

Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me,

and although she keeps her promise, the Queen utters not one word in condemnation of the crimes of Claudius which Hamlet has revealed to her, and indeed in the very next scene greets him as "mine own lord". Never is there an indication in the later scenes that her attitude toward Claudius or her relations with him have been altered by what Hamlet has told her. True it is that immediately following the Closet Scene she apparently lies to the King in an effort to protect her son. Although Hamlet has confessed to her that he is "not in madness, But mad in craft",

Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries 'A rat, a rat!'
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.

And she reports that Hamlet has gone

To draw apart the body he hath killed;
O'er whom his very madness, like some ore
Among a mineral of metals base,
Shows itself pure. 'A weeps for what is done.

One need have little hesitation in concluding that Gertrude is here lying in an effort to render Hamlet's act less responsible and therefore more pardonable. The Queen has not seen Hamlet since the audience witnessed their parting, and Hamlet was surely not weeping then. But though the Queen lies to help her son, it is important to add in any assay of her character that it was not upon her own initiative that she does so. Here no more than earlier is she acting independently. Incapable of herself determining any course of action, she is merely following the course which Hamlet had suggested to her. To her helpless "What shall I do?" Hamlet had replied:
HAMLET'S MOTHER

Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat King . . .
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know,
For who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
Such dear concernings hide? Who would do so?
No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions, in the basket creep
And break your own neck down.

Such is Hamlet's sarcastic direction in answer to the Queen's uncertain "What shall I do?" She must decide upon some course immediately, for the King is impatiently awaiting a report of the interview. Accordingly she follows Hamlet's direction; she lies to keep his secret, perhaps because maternal love demands that she protect him, but also because, accustomed to having others make all important decisions for her, she is incapable of substituting for Hamlet's direction any procedure of her own.

In Belleforest, as has been said, the Queen never appears after the account of the interview in her closet. Although we learn later that she had kept her promise to assist her son in his revenge upon her second husband by fashioning, during her son's absence in England, the means of his revenge, we are told nothing of her later life—how she conducted herself in her relations with the King or how she died. In Shakespeare's play, however, she figures in five later scenes—exactly half of the total number in which she appears. Her part in these scenes, having no basis in the older accounts, must have been added either by Shakespeare or by the author of an earlier lost play. The first of these scenes is that just mentioned—that in which she reports to the King. In only one of them, IV. v, her next appearance, does she reveal any remorse or any sense of guilt; and before the end of that scene her sense of guilt seems completely erased by a determination to follow the easier way, to accept the status quo, to continue a way of life she had found pleasant.

IV. v opens with her refusal to admit the mad Ophelia to her presence—a refusal due perhaps to a characteristic desire to escape any distressing situation, or perhaps to her already being burdened with grief and remorse. When Ophelia enters, Gertrude is sympathetic but quite inarticulate. Her three speeches to Ophelia are—in full:

1. How now, Ophelia?
2. Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?
3. Nay, but Ophelia—

Then, upon the King's welcome entry, with "Alas, look here, my lord", the Queen turns the unpleasant situation over to him and retires into silence until after Ophelia has departed. Her unwillingness to see Ophelia and her inability to express any words of comfort or sympathy may, as I have said, be due in part to her being, at the moment, too heavily oppressed by her own griefs and her
own sense of guilt. As Ophelia enters, Gertrude offers in an aside the only admission of guilt she makes after the Closet Scene:

To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)  
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.  
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,  
It spills itself in fearing to be split.

Before the end of the scene, however, the Queen is to cry out upon Laertes' mob threatening the King:

How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!  
0, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!

and, in order to save Claudius, is first to seize Laertes' arm and then to assure him that it was not Claudius who had caused the death of his father. Having, perhaps unconsciously, directed Laertes' hatred towards Hamlet, she offers no fuller explanation and is silent for the remaining ninety lines of the scene. Her extended silence here is certainly not indicative of remorse for her earlier acts; it has been characteristic of her throughout the play. In this scene she reveals perhaps, as she reveals nowhere else in the play, the sensual side of her love for Claudius. Before the scene is half over her sense of guilt has been crowded out of her mind. She shows no repentance. Unlike the Queen in Belleforest or the Queen in the pirated first quarto, she has not aligned herself on the side of her son. Now that he has gone, she finds it easier simply to continue the life she had led before he had made his dreadful revelation. Had Hamlet remained in Denmark, had he been at hand to remind her of her weakness and to answer whenever necessary her question "What shall I do?" it is possible that her sense of guilt might have persisted, that she might even have repented and changed her way of life. But without initiative and independence, she can in Hamlet's absence only drift with the current.

Only twice, then, does Gertrude reveal the least remorse—in the latter part of the Closet Scene and in the single aside as she awaits the entrance of the mad Ophelia. From that time on, as earlier in the play, her actions and speeches evince no prick of conscience although the Ghost, in his instructions to Hamlet in I. v, had implied that she was to suffer the consequence of her sins. "... Howsomer ever thou pursues this act", the Ghost had told his son,

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven  
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge  
To prick and sting her. . . .

The Ghost is, as I have noted, most accurately informed of the past. That ghosts were often well informed of the future is indicated by Horatio's beseeching the Ghost to speak

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,  
Which haply foreknowing may avoid.

But that ghosts might be ignorant of the future and even uncomprehending of the present is shown in The Spanish Tragedy by the repeated questioning by the Ghost of Andrea as he watches the play unfold. The Ghost of King Hamlet
clearly expects his son to sweep to a swift revenge; he does not understand the delay; nor surely did he expect such complete catastrophe to engulf the entire royal family. In spite of his exact knowledge of the past, therefore, it would appear that the Ghost's knowledge of the immediate present and of the future was far too limited to warrant our acceptance as testimony of Gertrude's remorse his mention of

... those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her....

Indeed, if one may, without confusing life and art, delve into the past of characters in a drama, it may be said that King Hamlet had ever but slenderly known his wife. Created in an heroic mould, he understood not the mortal frailties which might lead his "most seeming-virtuous queen"

to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of [his].

Just as he had, before learning of her transgressions, been deceived by his wife's seeming-virtue, so, after learning of them, he expected her to be tortured by the stings of conscience. He was apparently twice deceived.

But to continue tracing the Queen's part in the play. She appears, of course, in all of the last three scenes. She enters late in IV. vii, after the King and Laertes have completed their plans for bringing about Hamlet's death, and in her longest speech in the play announces Ophelia's drowning. Her purpose here, however, is that of a messenger; her speech throws little light on her character—and certainly reveals no awareness of her own responsibility for the young girl's death.

In V. i, the scene in the graveyard, the Queen first mentions in a single speech her thwarted hope that Ophelia might have been Hamlet's bride, and then, as Hamlet and Laertes struggle in the grave, she, in her remaining speeches, follows the lead of Claudius:

King: Pluck them asunder.
Queen: Hamlet, Hamlet!
King: O, he is mad, Laertes.
Queen: For love of God, forbear him.

Then:

This is mere madness;
And thus a while the fit will work on him.
Anon as patient as the female dove...
His silence will sit drooping.

The Queen, of course, does not know of the treachery plotted by Claudius and Laertes. She must by these speeches have sought to end the struggle in the grave and to lessen Laertes' resentment at Hamlet's behavior, but it is noticeable—and I think characteristic—that in each of her speeches she echoes or enlarges upon ideas just expressed by Claudius.

In V. ii, the concluding scene of the play, the Queen for the first time, I believe, acts with initiative and speaks for herself. Just before the court enters to

This content downloaded from 107.0.94.238 on Wed, 27 Sep 2017 19:29:14 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
watch the fencing match, an unnamed lord brings a message to Hamlet: “The Queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play”. As the effect of this message would be to lessen any suspicions of foul play, to encourage Hamlet’s acceptance of the match as a “brother’s wager frankly play[ed]”, one is tempted to suggest that the Queen’s message may have originated with the King, that here as earlier the Queen is being used to further the plan of another. (It will be remembered that immediately after the play-within-the-play Polonius brought Hamlet word that “the Queen would speak with you, and presently” (III. ii. 359), but, as previously noted, the idea of the interview was not the Queen’s. It had originated with Polonius, and the King, to whom he suggested it (III. i. 182ff.), had off-stage persuaded the Queen to cooperate.) However, in the absence of any statement to the contrary, I presume we must accept the message as the lord delivers it, as the Queen’s own suggestion. And in some respects it is a thoroughly characteristic suggestion, revealing as it does her recurring hope that in spite of all that had gone before, she and others, without being required to pay the price of penitence, may go on enjoying the present by simply refusing to remember the past.

During the closing scene the Queen is silent for the first sixty-one lines she is on stage. She then within a space of twenty-four lines has four speeches, totaling six pentameter lines. She refers to Hamlet’s scantness of breath and offers her napkin to mop his brow. Then, for the first time in the play escaping the dominance of Claudius, she acts independently and counter to his expressed wish—and her crossing him means her death.

**Queen:** . . . The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.

**King:** Gertrude, do not drink.

**Queen:** I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me.

And so she drinks from the poisoned cup. I can see no justification whatsoever for the view of a critic who sought to defend the Queen’s character by suggesting that she, suspecting the wine to be poisoned, drank it to protect Hamlet and to atone for the wrongs and sins of her past. Others, like the author of the *New Exegesis of Shakespeare* (1859), have remarked that her death was “as exquisitely negative as possible—that is, by poison, from her own hand, in a VINOUS BEVERIDGE [sic], and THROUGH MISTAKE.” But however negative her death, it was, ironically, the result of her one act of independence. And her final speech, in answer to the King’s hasty explanation, “She sounds to see them bleed”:

**No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet!**

The drink, the drink! I am poisoned—

Here for the first time the Queen seems to understand the essence of the situation. Only in this last speech does she recognize or admit to herself the villainy of her second husband. Only here—long after her counterpart in Belleforest had done so—does she take her position beside her son and against the King.

*University of Iowa*