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Supremacy: The People and Institutions That Strip Gertrude of Her Power in William Shakespeare's
Hamlet and John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*

by Alana Shuma

(English 1102)

God saw both man and woman as very good in the Book of Genesis. It is man, not God, as stated by Timothy. In his Book 1, chapter 2, verse 10-11, Timothy believes that “a woman should be quiet and respectful. I give no permission for a woman to teach or to have authority over a man” (*The New Jerusalem Bible*). William Shakespeare's Gertrude lacks power in her life, which spirals out of control until her death in the final scene in *Hamlet*. In a prequel to *Hamlet*, John Updike begins the story of Gerutha [Gertrude] in *Gertrude and Claudius* as a teenager controlled by her father in her betrothal to Horwendil [King Hamlet]. As Eugene Wright observes, “Shakespeare's view of humanity is not always pleasant, but it is accurate.” Shakespeare and Updike provide pointed insights into the difficulties women faced during the medieval period. Although Gertrude is a member of the royal family, the boundaries laid out by the Christian Church and the men in the royal court define Gertrude's life. Gertrude may appear to permit herself to be a controlled and weak woman; however, it is her insignificant societal status that does not permit her any power to control her destiny.

Gerutha begins her submissive role as a sixteen year old who does not want to marry a man she does not love and is more than ten years her senior. King Rorik, her father, reminds Gerutha that “To disobey the King is treason” (Updike 3). Gerutha knows that even as the Princess of Denmark she has no more rights than the peasant on the street when it comes to the orders of the King. As Laurence Mazzeno notes, as the only child of King Rorik, Gerutha is “stifled within the confines of society to which women are relegated.” Gerutha lost her mother at the age of three so she does not have a woman in the royal court that will stand up to King Rorik for her. Gerutha's submission to her marriage with Horwendil comes with her belief that she gained for herself “a reputation for realism, for reasonableness...A good woman lay in the bed others had made for her and walked in the shoes other had cobbled” (Updike 27).

Gerutha's feelings about religion and taking communion in Elsinore's chapel as a young girl are made known in this Updike passage: “Being in the chapel frightened her, as if her young body were a sin, to be avenged some day, pierced from underneath” (13). Updike continues, “even as she sipped the rasping wine the caustic blood of Christ, from the jewel-beknobbed chalice...the fusty smells made her feel *accused*; her natural warmth felt chastened” (13). The Christian Church uses wine in a chalice to symbolize the blood of Jesus Christ. As a practicing Christian, Gerutha was required to drink from the chalice as part of the sacrament of communion where the Christian Church then recognizes that all of her sins have been forgiven. Shakespeare's portrayal of Gertrude's adult life exposes her sin against the Christian Church as her eventual marriage to her brother-in-law, Claudius. Although Gertrude takes communion, she never receives forgiveness for her sin from Hamlet or the Christian Church and dies, ironically, when she drinks from a chalice containing poison filled by Claudius, the very individual who caused her sin in the first place. The paradox in Gertrude's death is, as Mazzeno notes, “She is a free thinker, able to criticize both the pagan rites with which she is familiar and the Christian beliefs that have become accepted doctrine in Denmark.” As much as Gerutha does not accept Christian doctrine, she is forced to participate in Christian rites and beliefs. It was the male doctrine of the Christian Church that condemned her marriage to Claudius, and it was King Rorik who forced Christian beliefs on her. Gerutha does not seem to

question whether there is a God; her actions later in life are condemned by a society that has confined her, never allowing her to choose her beliefs.

The marriage of Gerutha was a matter of state, not happiness for her. Horwendil had to prove his worthiness to King Rorik which he accomplished through battles and “seem[ed] to believe it is his right to take to bed young women from groups he has conquered” (Mazzeno). At the tender age of seventeen Gerutha marries Horwendil and laments the night before her marriage that once she is married “she must don the wife’s concealing coif in public” (Updike 20). Not only are Gerutha’s inner feelings squelched, but her outward appearance is greatly changed once she becomes a married woman. Gerutha is swept away from the only home and family she knows after her wedding reception to Horwendil’s home for a wedding night that disappoints her due to his excess of alcohol. Once the marriage is consummated and made known to the people of Denmark, Gerutha faces the realization that “Her virginity was a matter of state, for there was little doubt that Horwendil would be the next king, and her son the next after that, if God were kind. Denmark had become a province of her body” (Updike 26). Marriage for Gerutha was not a matter of having a husband who offered her a loving relationship and happiness for the rest of her life, marriage was another institution where Gerutha’s womanhood was valued only if she could produce an heir to the throne.

Gerutha continues her role as a dutiful wife and gives birth to her only son, Amleth [Hamlet]. Once Gerutha gives birth and the child is named by Horwendil, she expresses the opinion she “had hoped to have the infant named Rorik, thus honoring her father and planting a seed of prospective rule in the child. Horwendil chose to honor himself, though obliquely” (Updike 34). Gerutha is now Queen of Denmark and her husband, who would not be king without his marriage to her, does not care about her opinion or honoring her family. As a mother, Gerutha feels that as a young child Amleth “mocks me, even when he apes respect. Not yet six and he knows that women needn’t be listened to” (Updike 37). Raising a child is difficult, especially for a mother isolated and not supported by her husband. Gerutha, although shunned by her son and husband, loves Amleth. Gerutha is left by Horwendil while he rules Denmark and Amleth when he is sent to Wittenberg to attend school. Her usefulness to Horwendil is finished now that she has birthed a son. Amleth is removed from his mother’s care once he no longer requires breast feeding. This removal of a son from his mother is the beginning of the heartbreak of *Hamlet* since “this tragedy deals with death and sex and with the psychological and social tensions arriving from these basic facts of life” (Boyce 236).

After Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius, Hamlet arrives at Elsinore wearing all black. Gertrude encourages him, “Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted color off,/And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark” (Shakespeare 1331). By wearing black, Hamlet is able to outwardly express his grief for his father and “forced to retreat from [the public domain] into some area not controlled by Claudius: the ‘privacy’ of his own subjectivity” (Mangan 124). Whereas Hamlet is allowed, although not happily by the royal court, to grieve publicly, Gertrude has not been allowed any significant time to mourn the loss of her husband. Although Hamlet is a grown man, Gertrude continues to worry about her son when she asks him, “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet,/I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg” (Shakespeare 1332). Gertrude has suffered the tragic death of her husband and recently remarried. She gives the impression of wanting her son near her as a way for both of them to grieve and begin the healing process. As Sharon Ouditt notes, “She is not a whore, she is a good mother who made a mistake in marrying Claudius (not much perspicacity there) and who has been unfortunately branded ever since” (59). Gertrude has been told her entire life that she is to do what is best for Denmark and to follow the rules of the Christian Church. Unfortunately, her one act of marrying Claudius; an act she is led to believe is best for Denmark, ends up costing her the strained relationship with her son as well as being outcast by the Christian Church.

Gerutha grew up with Corambis [Polonius] as a trusted member of her father’s court. Without a mother, Corambis was a person she felt was a trusted friend. It was during her time of

loneliness she went to Corambis to help her find shelter outside of Elsinore to meet Feng [Claudius]. When she first approaches Corambis, “[i]t irritated her, even, to be at the mercy of her father’s and husband’s servant, a royal henchman, who in his habitual caution was making her beg unduly for a very modest favor” (Updike 99). Gerutha knows she is putting her life in jeopardy by trusting Corambis and even more so by secretly meeting Feng; however, she feels she is dying inside the castle. Gerutha is not innocent: she knows she is cheating on her husband. Despite her actions, she feels constrained by the men in control when she laments, “I confess this drawback: for one in my position, to keep a secret from the King is treason, the most capital of crimes” and although she confesses her sin to Corambis “the old politician would not let her off so cheaply” (Updike 101). Gerutha is risking her life and is completely in debt to Corambis for not only speaking to him of her desire, but in having him help her carry out the plan. Gerutha knows that Horwendil can have any mistress he wants, but she is left to sit in the castle and wait for him to come to her.

Gerutha resigns her life “as appraised through this inward eye had been a stone passageway with many windows but not one portal leading out. Horwendil and Amleth were the twin proprietary guards of this passageway and heavily barred death was its end” (Updike 56). As a wife and mother, Gerutha spends her time alone becoming a middle aged woman who enjoys the company of her brother-in-law, Feng, where she could have enjoyed a balance of power in this relationship. Even after Gertrude marries Claudius, she continues to be submissive to him when Claudius orders her, “Sweet Gertrude, leave us too” and Gertrude replies, “I shall obey you” (Shakespeare 1364). Gertrude’s resignation of her station in life does not seem to change with her age. As Ouditt observes: “it is as well to remember that feminism is a living, political practice with a range of goals. It constantly questions its own aims, blindneses, methods and assumptions from a number of perspectives” (57). As much as Gertrude might have wanted to change the balance of power in her life with her second marriage, she continues her role as an obedient wife and mother.

Claudius declares to the court, “Fortinbras,/Holding a weak supposal of our worth.../Our state to be disjoint and out of frame” (Shakespeare 1330). After the coronation, Claudius requires the members of the royal court to alter their names to a more Latin version. This change is a way for Claudius, himself, to turn over a new leaf and establish himself as the new king who, in fact, creates the tragic end of the entire court. Having Gerutha change her name to Gertrude was a way for Claudius to have his Queen as a different woman than his brother had. As Wright observes in his essay about several of Shakespeare’s plays, “The great tragedies and dark comedies written during this period analyze the most difficult problems concerning humankind, the cosmos, and human beings’ relationship with the cosmos.” What Claudius did not count on was that just because a person changes his or her name, it does not change the person inside. As noted by Harry Levin, “Claudius himself is unremittingly conscious of the distinction between the ‘exterior’ and ‘the inward man’” (52). Gertrude has changed her name because Claudius told her to do so to fit in with the new court, but all of the problems surrounding her have not changed.

As Ouditt writes, “This reading of Gertrude as a solicitous matriarch, her heart ‘cleft in twain’ by her equal loyalties to her son and to her husband, releases her from the female stereotype of ‘lascivious whore.’” She continues, “even if only to place her uncomfortably close to its dumb and vulnerable counterpart, characterized by unreflective passivity” (60). Gertrude’s role as Queen in the royal court, much less society, during the Dark Ages was a place of class rather than decision maker. She was seen as property to be used and discarded if necessary. The choices she made were for self-preservation in an era when wars were violent, kingdoms overthrown and women were not cared for because of their sex. Submission became a way of life for Gertrude to all the men in her life which took away her ability to have any power over her life.

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