

“frailty, thy name is  
woman”

Literature, British Literature



“ Frailty, Thy Name Is Woman" Frailty is something that seems to have lead many women to their downfall during The Elizabethan Age. In William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the two main female characters, (Gertrude and Ophelia), are victims of the tragic quote, “ frailty, thy name is woman". Both women show no real evidence of having a back bone throughout the entire story. They are manipulated and tricked into believe something that is not meant to be believed. As women, they have no choice but to listen to the men, whether they feed them lies or not; they believe it. Both Ophelia and Gertrude undergo severe and devastating occurrences, which are completely out of their own control. After the death of King Hamlet, Gertrude can hardly bare the loss of her deceased husband. So who does she turn to for support, the brother or her ex-husband. The new King, Claudius, states, “(t)herefore our sometime sister, now our queen. " (1. 2. 8). Gertrude quickly longs for attention, and marries as soon as possible. Showing that it seems she cannot survive and prosper on her own without guidance. Ophelia is devastated that her brother Leartes left her during her time of need. At that moment Ophelia begins to show signs of remorse and her father Polonius immediately puts her in her place. He punishes her on the terms that she must do as he says which is to talk to Hamlet for his own benefit, and her response is, “ I shall obey my lord" (1. 3. 141). This just goes to show how much emotion she lacks and what little say she has when decisions are made. After Gertrude witness’s firsthand the death of Polonius under the blade of her own son, she is in shock and confused. She is truly convinced that her son has gone mad and he is in need of desperate help. She turns to Claudius for advice and he recommends, “ we will ship him hence", (4. 1. 31). Gertrude is lead to

believe that Claudius is a nice a trustworthy man, who only wants the best for her son. However, what she is oblivious to is the fact that Claudius is planning to send her son off to be killed, due to Hamlet's knowledge of Claudius' part in the murder of his father. Now Gertrude is sleeping with her husbands' murderer, and she has no idea. Polonius and Claudius come up with a plan to determine Hamlets true source of his madness. They want Ophelia to talk to him and to get close to him; to find out as much as she possibly can. They are not concerned whatsoever of her safety, unaware to the extent of Hamlets madness, they are forcing her to do this out of their own curiosity. Polonius simply orders, " Ophelia, walk you here. — Gracious, so please you, (w)e will bestow ourselves" (3. 1. 48). Ophelia does not want to spy on the person she truly loves, however the fact that she is willing to do this for her father just goes to show how much her opinion matters in this situation. She is forced and manipulated into doing something she most desperately does not want to do. Nearing the end of Gertrude's reign as Queen, she is present at the fencing match between her son Hamlet and Leartes. Gertrude is completely naïve to the true meaning and vengeance behind this match. As she toasts to her sons success, she unknowingly drinks from a poisoned cups that was meant for her son, and was poisoned by her husband. During her last dying breaths she manages to spit out, " The drink, the drink! I am poisoned" (5. 2. 325). Once she lays lifeless on the ground, Hamlet raging with fury, her own husband completely disregards her death and is only focused on the task at hand. Even prior to her death, when he saw her drink the cup, all he had to say was, " It is the poisoned cup. It is too late" (5. 2. 303). This just goes to show how little remorse he had for is own

wife, and that he was more interested in power and reputation. It goes to show Gertrude's true cluelessness, and how much of a weak character she is. Ophelia slowly starts to lose her sanity after she becomes aware of her father's death. She begins speaking out of normality and rhyme scheme, and also starts singing what is on her mind. Her brother returns to her and tries to comfort her, but accuses her of going mad in the process. Ophelia simply states, “ I would give you some violets, but they all withered when my father died” (4. 5. 193). This signifies that all of Ophelia's faith was gone; it had all “ withered” away after the death of her father. He was the only man that she looked up to in her life, and without his guidance, she was lost. As a result to her lack of guidance, she committed suicide. This signified Ophelia's true frailness as a character that she was easily breakable, and once something in her life was smashed, it was impossible to pick up the pieces, and put her life back together. One would consider these women tragic heroes. Both Ophelia and Gertrude are kind hearted and loving characters throughout the entire story. Always looking for guidance, never able to stand up for themselves, victims of true frailty. It is a shame that they will never know, these simple flaws, are the ones that lead to their reverent downfall.