

GERTRUDE IN *HAMLET*

In *Hamlet*, Gertrude is a woman who means no harm but whose poor judgment contributes greatly to the terrible events that occur. There are only two female characters in the play, and neither one--Gertrude or Ophelia--is assertive. But the decisions Gertrude does make eventually lead to her death and the downfall of others as well.

We first realize in Act I, Scene 2 that poor judgment is her major character flaw. As the mother of a grieving son, Gertrude should have been more sensitive to Hamlet's feelings. Instead, less than two months after King Hamlet's death, Gertrude remarries Claudius, her dead husband's own brother. Gertrude should have realized how humiliated Hamlet would feel as a result, because at that time it was considered incestuous for a widow to marry her husband's brother. There is also jealousy on the part of a son, who feels that his mother should be giving him more attention during the mourning period. Gertrude is not in touch with her own son's feelings to see why he is angry. Hamlet expresses this outrage during his first soliloquy:

O, most wicked speed, to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (I.ii 156-157)

Gertrude is shown to be a loving mother but a parent who cannot read into her son's behavior. When answering Hamlet, she says that it is common for all men to die, but this is not just any man who has died, she should realize; it's Hamlet's own father! Also, when Gertrude asks Hamlet:

If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee? (I.ii 74-75)

she means to calm him down, but the word "seems" only makes Hamlet more suspicious. She fails to realize that in his sensitive mood, the word "seems" will give Hamlet the impression that she is hiding something. At this point, Gertrude has the opportunity to ask Hamlet what he