

Trinny D

Assess the presentation of women and their relationships with men in the Almereyda version (2000) of *Hamlet* in comparison to the text.

Almereyda's film version of *Hamlet* was released in 2000 and was novel in its modernisation of the play's concepts, through setting it in contemporary New York City. The Shakespearean dialogue is accurately preserved but modern concepts are employed to tell the story, with a particular specialisation being technology. *Hamlet* allows different interpretations of the play, but the Almereyda version cuts large sections of dialogue and alters the scene structure. This demonstrates the flexible nature of *Hamlet*, whilst still valuing the importance of the story. Act 3 Scene 1 is fascinating to compare to the Almereyda version, as it provides more insight into the theme of representation of women, through analysis of the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet and how their respective characters are presented in contrast to the text. Additionally, the character of Gertrude is also explored. The sequence chosen runs from 59:58 to 1:05:07 and provides an insight into the characters at the moment where Hamlet and Ophelia are being spied upon by Claudius and Polonius.

Almereyda presents Gertrude as showing an impassive manner towards Ophelia, differing to the potential interpretation from the text in which it could be inferred that she favours the relationship between her son and Ophelia. She hopes that Ophelia is the 'happy cause' of Hamlet's 'antic disposition', but this is said coldly. However, Almereyda's Gertrude seems insincere and is portrayed as being sexually overt towards Claudius. In this scene she is sitting on his lap and earlier in the film she lures him away from work by kissing him. This interpretation aligns with the opinion of several critics, such as Granville-Barker who reasons that Gertrude 'does little except echo [Claudius'] wishes'¹. This view is supported in the text as Claudius wonders 'If't be h'affliction of his love or no that thus he suffers for', which is closely followed by Gertrude wishing 'that your good beauties be the happy cause of Hamlet's wildness.' This link between the two characters is reinforced by Gertrude only speaking after she has been mentioned by Claudius and Gertrude being ready to 'obey you'. Interestingly, however, in Almereyda's version, Claudius' wishes over the matter are cut and it is Gertrude who introduces the issue, suggesting a more empowered representation of her.

Much of the dialogue at the beginning of the scene is removed, but the naturalistic effect is preserved through the informality of the setting, mirroring the fact that the scene in the text begins in media res with 'And can you by no drift of circumstance.' Despite this, there is still a formal air to the proceedings, illustrated by the use of verse which demonstrates Claudius' control and power; juxtaposed with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speaking over the phone. Their mingled rendition of 'We shall my lord', highlights the insignificance of the characters in the film, to the extent where one is unable to tell them apart.

Throughout the sequence, Ophelia is unable to express her emotions verbally and can only do so physically. She is completely controlled by both Hamlet and Claudius. Neely draws attention to the fact that 'until her madness, Ophelia scarcely exists outside of men's use of her'². This is demonstrated by Ophelia being employed to spy on her love, and through Hamlet's consistent manipulation of her, perhaps in an attempt to vex Claudius. However, she is unable to express her emotions over the matter as in the film she begins to cry but quickly tries to cover this up. This insinuates that she wants no part in the matter but feels powerless; she has a lack of control. Several critics have noted this, including Showalter who states that 'Ophelia is deprived of thought, sexuality, language.'³ Evidence of this is manifested by Ophelia's frequently dispassionate remarks. There are few, if any instances in the play where she gives an opinion, and these only tend to occur during her period of madness. An example of her lack of language and thought is illustrated by the inequality in dialogue between herself and Hamlet. She speaks in short sentences, despite having a wealth of emotion, as shown in Almereyda's version. This is demonstrated by the fact that she 'was the more deceived.' This short remark conceals a world of feeling that is then immediately followed by Hamlet freely expressing his opinions in long

¹ Granville-Barker, H., 2006. *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors. p. 245.

² Neely, N, T., 1994. *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*. United States: University of Illinois Press. p. 103

³ Showalter, E., 2016. *Ophelia, gender and madness*, [British Library]. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/ophelia-gender-and-madness>

speeches. As well as this, at the end of the scene, Ophelia is denied her monologue where she emphasises her concerns over Hamlet following his anger at her. Thus, there is a major power imbalance in their relationship that Hamlet frequently exploits in an attempt to manipulate Ophelia.

The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia manifests differently in Almereyda's version in comparison to conventional interpretations. When they meet, Hamlet is gentle and consoling, whilst Ophelia is stiff and attempts to return several mementoes of their relationship. However, Hamlet kisses her and she gives in, which raises the notion that although 'she is not a woman without spirit'⁴, it is a weakness of spirit that allows her to be easily and readily manipulated. Nonetheless, this rare sign of harmony in their relationship mirrors Shakespeare's use of prose which accentuates the closeness and familiarity between the characters. An informal atmosphere is further created by Almereyda through Hamlet offering Ophelia a soft drink. In the text, it seems that Hamlet is enjoying the power that comes with remarks such as 'Ha, ha, are you honest?' but in the film this is spoken with emotion and done so gently. There is, however, still an abrupt and coarse nature in 'I did love you once' and 'I loved you not', despite the apologetic tone that greatly affects Ophelia, to the extent where she can barely speak 'I was the more deceived.' Despite Ophelia expressing her feelings physically, through tears, she still sustains a passive stance through her lack of language, causing Hamlet's behaviour to be cruel.

Conversely, Hamlet is able to express his feelings freely and he becomes violent and pushes Ophelia away savagely when discovering that she had been spying. Despite this, one could interpret that he looks less angry and more upset at the betrayal by Ophelia. This aligns with Muir's idea that 'Hamlet is first to last a creature of circumstance.'⁵ There is great juxtaposition in his quickly changing moods as effectively depicted by Almereyda; at first he is passionate and loving but he instantly alternates to anger and disgust. This effectively causes an audience to question the nature of Hamlet's character further and assess the true nature of his 'antic disposition', as, to an extent, he has control over his mind but his impulsivity and rapid change of emotions begs the contrary. His behaviour towards Ophelia is self-destructive with emotional intensity, illustrating the depth of his emotion towards her. Interestingly, in the text, it is assumed that Hamlet knows that Claudius and Polonius are spying on him throughout the scene, but in the film, he seems to be more shocked than the audience might expect. Thus, perhaps his emotions at the beginning of the scene had truth. Furthermore, the emotional intensity of the scene is enhanced by the lack of cuts to the speeches of Claudius and Polonius, as other films show. This allows the audience to experience the dynamic between Ophelia and Hamlet more effectively.

At the end of the scene, the film focuses on Ophelia's reaction. Despite this, Almereyda once again deprives Ophelia of verbal thought and instead only a physical reaction is represented. She burns the photos of her and Hamlet, suggesting the finality of the end of their relationship. To a degree, some of the gravity of Hamlet's words is lost through the detached nature of his speeches which are presented through an answerphone. However, this also illustrates the estranged mind of Hamlet. He becomes more furious, through these messages, initially repeating the misogyny of 'Get thee to a nunnery' coolly, before escalating into a shout. This bitterness towards her raises the question of whether Ophelia could have saved Hamlet from his burden, but due to her actions, he becomes more deeply affected and sinks further into his conflict.

In conclusion, there is a great deal of similarity in the presentation of Ophelia between the text and the film, as she is deprived of opinion with Almereyda extending this further by cutting her monologue at the end of Act 3 Scene 2. As a result, she can only express her emotion physically, through tears, leading the audience to see the huge power imbalance in her relationship. Hamlet is oppressive and manipulative, demonstrated through his quick change of emotion and his misogynistic comments. He is also given freedom of thought and speech in contrast to Ophelia. In Almereyda's version, Gertrude is more empowered, but also more sexualised. It is also clear throughout the play and the film that she is under Claudius' control, through mirroring his wishes. Overall, women are portrayed as being secondary to men, as shown by the complex and self-destructive relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Word Count: 1,499

⁴ Salter, M., 1998.

⁵ Muir, K., 1956. *Shakespeare's Sources. Volume I. Comedies and Tragedies*. London: Methuen.