

Gertrude's Transformations: Against Patriarchal Authority

Mohammad Safaei¹ & Ruzy Suliza Hashim¹

¹ School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

Correspondence: Mohammad Safaei, B1, Lot 21430, Jalan Bangi, Batu 18 ½, Sg. Tangkas, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. Tel: 601-7370-5674. E-mail: safaeim@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Gertrude's characterization in *Hamlet* is extensively analyzed with regard to her infidelity, promiscuity, and ostensibly virtuous nature. Further, much criticism on Gertrude is based on the content of *Hamlet* and the Ghost's parlance which is male-oriented in perspective. Within the domain of revisioning literature, Gertrude and the characters who have assumed a role resembling that of Gertrude have been subject to a variety of transformations. The present article intends to explore these transformations in two twenty-first century novels: *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* by David Wroblewski (2009) and *The Dead Fathers Club* by Matt Haig (2006). Gertrude's new characterization is analyzed with regard to three features: ecstasy, motherhood, and agency. Whereas Gertrude's agency in *Hamlet* is conjectural and though her soundness of mind and her personality as a responsible mother are questioned in the play, the two female characters in these two novels reveal new dimensions which starkly distinguish them from Gertrude's Shakespearean characterization. Further, it is argued that these new revisionings of *Hamlet* should not be construed as mere responses to the original text, but also to the idea that Shakespeare has provided the ultimate representations of humanity. As such, the new characterization of Gertrude is subversive of both the patriarchal voice within the Shakespearean text and some portion of the contemporary social text which believes in the superiority of Shakespeare's thought.

Keywords: Gertrude, *Hamlet*, revisioning, ecstasy, motherhood, agency

1. Introduction

The critical discourse on Gertrude mainly addresses her flaws: concupiscence, adultery, indiscretion, to name a few, and the tragic consequences of these flaws for the other characters of the play. Albeit her meager part in *Hamlet*, her role is symptomatically destructive, if not for the whole state of Denmark, for many characters within the play. Stone (2010, pp. 72-3) argues that Gertrude is in possession of an insatiable devouring orality which renders men who marry her impotent and sexually hollow. Gertrude has no choice but to live adulterously to gratify her ever-increasing urge for coition. The belief, according to Haverkamp (2006, p. 174), in the promiscuous nature of Gertrude has been cogent enough for some critics to contend that *Hamlet* is Claudius's son. Jenkins (1982, pp. 455-6) suggests that Gertrude had adulterous relations with Claudius; otherwise, the Ghost's revelation of an incestuous relation, which, according to the norms of the day, was, among others, ascribed to a conjugal bond between a widow and his late husband's brother, provides no substantial evidence of which *Hamlet* is nescient. In other words, the ghost apprizes *Hamlet* of his mothers' adulterous nature. Lidz's (1975, p. 56) argument is that the text of *Hamlet* attests to the Ghost's dismay as a consequence of being cuckolded by an ostensibly virtuous wife.

The monstrosity of Gertrude's lubricious nature cannot be explained in earthly terms. As such, *Hamlet* evokes cosmic imagery to explain the iniquity of his mother's sensuality: "Heaven's face does glow / O'er this solidity and compound mass / With trustful visage, as against the doom, / Is thought-sick at the act" (3.4.48-51). (Note 1) In this imagery Gertrude's lewdness has made the sky to blush with shame and the earth to wear a sorrowful countenance (Hankins, 1978, p. 33). The obscenity of Gertrude's sexual promiscuity is to the extent that Watson (2004, p. 480), elaborating on the term "union" in *Hamlet*—"The King shall drink to *Hamlet's* better breath, / And in the cup an union shall he throw" (5.2.268-9)—argues that Gertrude symbolizes the biblical figure the Whore of Babylon. Gertrude's sexuality, in Traub's (1992) opinion, is both rampant and epidemic, for, according to the patriarchal themes of *Hamlet*, her "adultery turns all women into prostitutes and all men into potential cuckolds" (p. 29). Lidz (1975, p. 17) contends that the collapse of *Hamlet's* expectations of Gertrude as mother and as the epitome of female virtues results in *Hamlet's* generalization of infidelity as a feminine trait per se and,

eventually, in his calumination of Ophelia.

Much of Gertrude's characterization, as briefly explored in this short introduction, underscores her unrestrained sexuality and the deleterious consequences of her lewdness for the lives of other characters. Though there is no consensus, among critics, as to Gertrude's lechery, the content of much discussion on Gertrude is imbued with discourse on her sexuality from a variety of perspectives: patriarchal, feminist, political. Despite such monstrosity in Gertrude's characterization, there are critics who argue that Shakespeare has molded our conception of man's nature and thought and that it is through Shakespeare that we discern various aspects of human character. Garber (2008), for instance, contends that Shakespeare is our contemporary as he is the author of many of our conceptions as to "human character, about individuality and selfhood, about government, about men and women, youth and age, about the qualities that make a strong leader" (p. xiii). Bevington (2011) is convinced that *Hamlet* has had a tremendous effect not only on the cultural history of the Anglo-Saxon countries but on "the persons and societies of all nations and all ages who have turned to it for a better understanding of themselves" (p. vii). As such, the new attitudes toward Gertrude and her characterization, in some twenty-first century novels, as a figure who surpasses the confines of her characterization in *Hamlet* mark instances of resistance not only against the representation of Gertrude as a lewd personality in *Hamlet*, but also as a reaction to those critics who regard Shakespeare as the ultimate authority on man's nature. The two modern revisionings of *Hamlet*, presented in this article, provide the readers with a new female character, who, though entrapped in circumstances which bear resemblance to the plot of *Hamlet*, remains distinct from the Shakespearean version of Gertrude.

2. Gertrude's New Characterization

Revisioning literature is the space in which literary works, some of them with canonical status, or, by canonical authors, are presented or recreated from new critical perspectives. The purpose of revisioning is twofold: to comply relatively with a previous author and then to rectify him (Bloom, 1973, pp. 28-9). As such, the extent of reaction to the text of *Hamlet*, and in fact, the analysis of the new characterizations—in revisioning literature—of Gertrude entails juxtaposition within the critical domain where the Shakespearean version of Gertrude has been analyzed. For instance, one of the reasons, according to Lidz (1975, pp. 78-9), for Hamlet's indignation at his mothers' second marriage is that Hamlet, as a result of his patriarchal attitudes, is convinced that Gertrude has reached a certain age when a woman's sexual desires has to be restrained by self-reserve; hence, Hamlet's exasperation may not be a symptom of oedipal conflicts, but a consequence of masculine or traditional expectations of a woman at the age of Gertrude. A point of distinction in *The Dead Fathers Club* and *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* is that the two widows, Carol and Trudy, who, in these novels, assume a role comparable to that of Gertrude, are younger than the Shakespearean Gertrude; both have a young son; and both reveal their erotic passions throughout the novel, though Carol, living in Nottinghamshire, is beset by a more conservative community than Trudy who lives in the American society of Wisconsin; yet both Trudy and Carol possess certain traits which markedly distinguish them from their Shakespearean prototype.

Wroblewski (2009, Interview, p. 22) stresses that his novel is not a retelling but an overall subversion of *Hamlet*. Conversely, various textual allusions to *Hamlet* in his novel, for instance, murder by poisoning, the rivalries as well as altercations between the two brothers over the management of the farm, the suspicious death of Gar, the appearance of Gar's ghost, Edgar's aversion to his uncle's intrusive presence, the chemistry between Claude and Trudy who, as a widow, direly needs help to manage their breeding farm, and the manslaughter, though inadvertent, of Dr. Papineau by Trudy's revengeful son Edgar, are not but a few instances which not only, as a result of their resemblance to *Hamlet*, arouse certain expectations in the readers, but call for juxtapositional analyses to investigate the variety of transformations in the novel as a revisioning of *Hamlet*. Carol of *The Dead Fathers Club* is also entrapped in a Hamletian world though she is seemingly situated in a small town in Nottinghamshire, England. Despite the hilarious tone of the novel, which makes it appear at times a parody of *Hamlet*, the lives of the major figures of the novel are affected by the ghost figure, his sinister interference, and his importunate insistence on revenge. In the following, we will present an analysis of Trudy and Carol's characterization under three rubrics: ecstasy, motherhood, and agency.

2.1 Ecstasy

Gertrude's judgment and wisdom, Hankins (1978, pp. 94-5) mentions, is a question in *Hamlet*, for marriage to Claudius marks not only Gertrude's vulgarity of taste but her insanity; in fact, Hamlet construes Gertrude's preference of a satyr to a Hyperion as an instance of "ecstasy" (3.4.74) which is explained, drawing on Thomas Aquinas, as a mental state in which one's mind surpasses the boundaries of rationality; Gertrude lacks "discourse of reason" (1.2.150), a divine wisdom conferred upon human beings, a quality which distinguishes man from

beasts; Gertrude's being devoid of it is a deficiency for which she is censured by Hamlet in his first soliloquy in Act 1. Watson (2004, p. 481) argues that to marry Claudius and thus to consent to his sexual desires is, according to the Ghost in *Hamlet*, a descent from an angelic position to the status of beasts. The Ghost, according to Traub (1992, p. 30), explains the second marriage of Gertrude as a plunge into a whorish abyss; in other words, the text of *Hamlet* is, by virtue of its patriarchal ideology, assigning a dualistic role to women: women are either angels or harlots though the play arouses the suspicion that women are prone to harlotry and their angelic features are more a matter of disguise.

Hence, this is irrationality that has made Gertrude to opt for a second man who is inferior to her late husband. The character of Claudius in the two novel revisionings of *Hamlet* is not unprepossessing, however. In *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, Claude is a personable figure though at times he seems unruly and lecherous. He is "the great distracter. He took an almost malevolent pleasure in tempting the dogs while she [Trudy] trained them," (Wroblewski, 2009, p. 552) and Trudy relished his impulsive naughtiness, "laughing" and asking, "How'd you do *that*?" (p. 552). Wroblewski presents ordinariness in men as a flaw of character if they are earnest in attracting women's attention. Henry, a minor character in the novel, confesses that he is rebuffed by his ex-girlfriend because of being "ordinary," recalling that she "Said she loved me, even, but she'd decided I was too ordinary.... Every time she looked at me she felt love, and she felt ordinariness at the same time" (p. 467). Hence, there is calculated reason for Trudy to love Claude. Unlike Henry and Gar—Trudy's late husband—Claude has an interestingly unpredictable nature. He is, as Wroblewski (2009) portrays him, worldly with a broad view regarding what humanity is, though his knowledge may, at times, seem sinister:

Claude's gift—if that's what it could be called—was all the more baffling for its effortless. He seemed to know every human recreation within a day's drive. Unsolicited, people bore news to him of celebrations, large or small. Everything from the feed mill codgers' plan to sample the diner's new meat loaf to baseball games and back-alley fights. (p. 552)

Claude is antithetical to his dead brother Gar. Gar "loved" the breeding records of their dogs, for he "believed as fervently in the power of breeding" (p. 553); on the contrary, Claude paid no attention to them, for "to him, they were nothing more than a means to an end" (p. 553). Claude, as a pragmatist with lucid utilitarian objectives is more intrigued by the achievement of financial profit. Trudy, too, is more interested in training of the dogs than their breeding. Hence, both Trudy and Claudius are common in what they do not consent to: breeding as a key factor in promoting business, and thus Claude's lack of interest in breeding is more in line with Trudy who is always attempting to downgrade the importance of breeding. Trudy cannot avoid comparing the two brothers and to her they are absolute "opposites:" Claude is impulsive, rambunctious, and passionate whereas "Gar...repelled commotions, even happy commotions, in favor of a passionate orderliness" (p. 552). Claude is an extrovert; and Trudy, who was brought up as an orphan, finds in him the vista of a new life with new adventures and friends in the same vicinity where she, during the life of her insipid husband, used to live like a hermit:

That very evening they had set out to buy groceries in Park City and ended up at, of all things, a wedding reception in someone's backyard, the friend of a cousin of a man Claude had once met at The Hollow. Just for an hour, Claude had promised, though it had been close to midnight when they'd driven home. As an orphan, handed from relation to relation a half dozen times before she was twelve, Trudy could wield an insular self-reliance, but how could she not be charmed when a group of near-strangers welcomed them—people she'd lived among for all these years but had never met. (p. 552)

Claude's vivacity of spirit creates enthusiastic diversions for Trudy and does not let her to immerse, as a result of bereavement, in brooding: "Whenever she began to brood, Claude particularly leapt to draw her away, toward wine and music, things immediate and uncomplicated. A movie in Ashland. Back road drives through bosky glades. A walk by the falls, where the Bad River crashed...with an engulfing roar" (p. 553). Claude's passionate spontaneity is revealed in the lines from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" he murmurs when he and Trudy are looking at the tortuous flow of the Bad River: "Mid these dancing rocks at once and ever, it flung up momentarily the sacred river. Five miles meandering with a mazy motion...sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean" (pp. 553-4). Murmuring Coleridge's poetry reveals not only Claude's lively personality but his being versed in passionate romantic literature. He is both sociable and sophisticated. He is in certain respects a volatile unconventional character—unordinary—and as such superior to his late brother who rather led a life of monotony till the moment of his death. Whereas life with Gar was, for Trudy, limited to mere concentration on the breeding of dogs, life with Claude is involvement with the society of which Trudy was unaware of almost all her life till the moment of her intimacy with Claude.

Like Claude in *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, Alan in *The Dead Fathers Club* is superior to his late brother. Hence,

Carol, in *The Dead Fathers Club*, reveals thoughtfulness in the choice of her second love partner. She bluntly expresses her aversion of her late husband's slovenly habits and his irresponsibility with regard to the loans and loss of profit: "Brian left everything in a mess. I had no idea how much money he had borrowed. And how much the Pub was losing. He never bloody told me" (Haig, 2006, p. 229). In comparison with profligate imprudent Brian, Uncle Alan, Carols tells her mother, has been so "nice" and "kind" (p. 229). Uncle Alan is not only generous in spirit, but he is also innovative in preparing entertaining programs like singing and quiz competitions for the customers. This is why, through time, Philip observes, his mother, who was enraged by her late husband's slight instances of misdemeanor, is not critical of Alan's slipshod behavior like leaving the bits of bread in butter or slurping his tea; Carol also laughs at Alan's uncouth jokes which seem to Philip insulting (pp. 103-4). Finally, whereas the choice of Claudius for Queen Gertrude is termed as unnatural and regarded as a descent from an angelic position to that of a harlot in *Hamlet*, the choice of Alan who is more sympathetic and understanding than Brian can hardly be interpreted as Carol's misjudgment. Nor can regarding the impulsive and charming and helpful Claude, as a love partner, be regarded as an indiscretion for Trudy though she, toward the end of the novel, describes malice in his character.

Hence, in the novel revisionings of *Hamlet*, there can be observed rationality—which is not omniscient or infallible—on the part of women characters who discern some merits in their brother-in-laws which were meager or non-existent in their late husbands. As such, to seek a second sexual partner in the figure of a supporting understanding versatile brother-in-law, who is superior to a woman's late husband, is not—in the ambience of twenty-first century western sensibility—an instance of ecstasy; in fact, in the context of modern British and American society, such a marriage on the part of a widow may be construed as quite commonsensical for both Carol and Trudy.

2.2 Motherhood

A part of Hamlet's consternation in the Shakespearean play is the result of being deprived of motherly affection. Hamlet's dejection and melancholy as depicted in the second scene of act one is not the consequence of losing his father but the loss of his mother. Hamlet identifies himself with the late king and thus he expects his mother to devote her affections to her son, for with the end of the oedipal period, a son tends to assume his father's priority with his mother, and as such, he believes that he must be the next recipient of her affections. When Hamlet returns from Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, he expects to become his mother's major support and to accede to the throne, but he learns that he has deceived himself, for his mother has already hastened to marry his uncle (Lidz, 1975, pp. 50-1). Stevenson (2002) explores that Hamlet's evocation of Hecuba's mournful tears for her husband is the result of his being deprived of parental, in fact, motherly care because

Hecuba's lamentation for Priam does not appear in Virgil's text, in his sources...or in the English adaptations of William Caxton, John Lydgate, George Peele, Christopher Marlowe, and Thomas Nashe....What does appear in Virgil is Hecuba and Priam's mutual mourning for their son Polites, whom Pyrrhus has stalked and slain before their eyes. Polites is, like Hamlet, caught in machinery which both sets of parents have set in motion, but he inspires from them what Hamlet poignantly lacks, namely demonstration by both parents of love for their son and grief for his suffering. (p. 446)

Unlike Gertrude, Trudy aggressively defends her son against two men—Claude and Glen, the sheriff, whose role within the novel resembles that of Laertes in *Hamlet*. She does not want Claude to find Edgar as she, now suspicious of Claude's integrity, endeavors "to distract Claude, close behind her, from the sight of" (Wroblewski, 2009, p. 597) his son, and brutally slaps Glen on the face to elicit from him the reason of his trespassing the premises of her farm in the dead of night. We must mention parenthetically that Glen, as a sheriff, is trying to discover the death of his father; and Claude is not an utterly devilish character. However, Trudy's manner, in defense of her son, is mixed with cruelty. Neither does she help Glen, who is "moaning" and on the verge of blindness due to quicklime in his eyes, to enter her house to wash his eyes, nor does she allow Claude to help the sheriff enter the house. She orders both men to stand still: "You'll wait", she says, "Until I know my son is safe" (p. 598). Her inhumane cruelty and exacting manner in regard to the critical status of Glen seems to be retaliatory. On the night Gar died, Glen as the sheriff insisted on interrogating Edgar though Edgar was suffering the most traumatic incident of his life; on the night when Glen is suffering from quicklime in his eyes (as the result of a desperate struggle between him and Edgar in the barn), Trudy reveals her immense power for retaliation; she does not allow Claude help Glen wash his eyes unless he explains the reason of his staying there: "First he's going to explain what he was *doing here*" (p. 598).

In *Hamlet*, Gertrude immediately reports the death of Polonius to the king, though she tries to soften the committed crime by ascribing it to Hamlet's madness: "Mad as the sea and wind....In his lawless fit....And in

this brainish apprehension kills / The unseen good old man” (4.1.7-12). In both *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* and *The Dead Fathers Club*, the mothers deliberately hide some capital crime—a manslaughter whether voluntary or involuntary—which their sons have committed. In the former novel, Philip sets fire to the garage of his uncle to kill him, but he kills Mr. Fairview inadvertently. When the police are investigating the case, Carol provides fake alibi for her son by remarking that Philip was at home when the fire broke out: “Mum said He was here. He came back from school at four. He was upstairs in his room...but it was a lie and I looked at Mum and she looked at me like she knew what I [sic] done” (Haig, 2006, p. 272). Edgar’s violent push with a hay hook results in Dr. Papineau’s death, yet Trudy forges a story: that “Page [nickname for the doctor] fell down the stairs” (Wroblewski, 2009, p. 371). Lidz (1975, p. 78) argues that Shakespeare is ambiguous with regard to Gertrude’s knowledge of murder; nor does Hamlet censure his mother for complicity or connivance. Contrarily, both Carol and Trudy are, in legal terms, accessories; and both commit prevarication if not perjury.

That women characters in *Hamlet*, Bethell (1970) opines, cannot prevaricate appears to be a function of their depersonalization: the double nature of characters in Elizabethan drama whose playwrights were more concerned about the intensification of events within their plays than with the unity of episodes and characterization. As to characterization, depersonalization has resulted in inconsistent representations of a character’s psyche. With regard to Gertrude one can observe the playwright’s concentration on the content of the queen’s speech than on her identity or status within the play. Gertrude’s poignant and poetic description of Ophelia’s death depicts, on the one hand, deep commiseration, and, on the other hand, her hypocrisy, for Gertrude—with the possibility that she or people linked to her were witness to Ophelia’s suicide or even to her accidental drowning and did nothing to save her—can be regarded as an accessory and thus her speech is a disingenuous confession of her own guilt and negligence. In other words, if one regards Gertrude’s characterization in the light of depersonalization technique which was a consequence of histrionic intensification in Shakespearean drama, then it can be argued that Gertrude—in the scene where she recounts Ophelia’s death scene—“loses her identity during an entire speech, so that she may perform the part of a messenger to inform us of Ophelia’s end” (p. 109).

By the same token, one may argue that Gertrude, when recalling the death scene of Polonius, performs the role of a trustworthy messenger; otherwise, one may contend that Gertrude is, in fact, exonerating herself and her actions—i.e. her pusillanimous cries and her lack of tact in confronting the mad Hamlet—as the cause of Polonius’s death. Bethell (1970, pp. 109-110) argues that if one does not consent to the concept or technique of Gertrude’s depersonalization in *Hamlet*, then he can conclude that Gertrude, based on textual evidence, is a lewd woman who has preferred a satyr and a swinish life and thus her account of Ophelia’s death testifies to her sinister and hypocritical nature. Hence, we would like to contend that—disregarding the depersonalization technique for episodic intensification—this is Gertrude’s rashness and tactlessness (in Act 3, Scene 4) which results in the death of Polonius, though the queen does not—in her report to the king—refer to her own tactless reprimands: “Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue” (3.4.10); to her threatening remarks: “Nay, then I’ll set those to you that can speak” (3.4.16); to her unfounded apprehension: “What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?” (3.4.20); and finally, to her pusillanimous invocation of help: “Help, ho!” (3.4.21). Without holding herself responsible for the death of Polonius, Gertrude in *Hamlet* lays all blame on her son—or, one may contend, on her son’s madness—and thus portrays the whole tragic incident as follows: “In his lawless fit...whips out his rapier, cries ‘A rat, a rat’, / And in this brainish apprehension kills / The unseen good old man” (4.1.8-12).

Unlike Gertrude who is not attentive to the emotions of Hamlet and lays all the blame, for the death of Polonius, on Hamlet and his madness, both Carol and Trudy not only act, on several occasions, as caring mothers, but they are also supportive of their sons in moments of crisis, though the extent of their bias and prejudice in defense of their sons differ, and though their prevarications regarding the death of Polonius figure in the two novels, may be regarded, in criminal terms, as perjury or complicity, which remains undiscovered and unpunished, in legal terms, in these novels.

2.3 Agency

The question of agency for the two women characters of this article overlaps the previous two discussions on ecstasy and maternal support as both Trudy and Carol reveal a considerable degree of determination in their decisions and choice of new love partners. However, unlike Trudy and Carol who reveal a broad range of determination, Gertrude seems to reveal her will and agency in a radically different manner. For instance, Sinfield (2006, p. 26) argues that Gertrude is generally regarded by critics as an unproblematic character, yet she reveals her sophistication and obstinacy on various occasions; Hamlet, for example, urges her to adopt a life of repentance and abstinence: “Confess yourself to heaven, / Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come; / And do not spread the compost on the weeds / To make them ranker” (3.4.151-4), and yet there is no convincing textual evidence that reveals Gertrude’s compliance with her son’s moralistic pieces of advice. Thus agency for Gertrude

is to continue her sexual relation with Claudius despite Hamlet's ethical teachings. A rather similar observation is mentioned by Spinrad (2005, p. 469) who argues that Hamlet's vehement upbraiding of his mother reveals vestiges of the sixteenth century sermons which would elicit repentance from the audience. Despite being advised to eschew sex and despite evidence for the possibility of leading an abstemious life, *Hamlet's* text is mute as to Gertrude's consent. Thus one possible aspect of Gertrude's agency is that she continues her so-called incestuous life despite being advised not to. The other plausible instance of agency is, Sinfield (2006, pp. 25-6) opines, manifested in her muteness as to Claudius's imperatives which may be interpreted as resistance. Gertrude is silent to Claudius's amorous overtures: "O Gertrude, come away" (4.1.28); "Come, Gertrude" (4.1.38); "O come away" (4.1.44). It may be argued that Gertrude remains unresponsive to these sexual requests because she has been urged by Hamlet to avoid intercourse with the king, or simply she may not be in the mood of having coitus. In general, Gertrude appears to be voiceless on all occasions when Claudius addresses her: "O Gertrude, Gertrude" (4.5.73), "O my dear Gertrude" (4.5.77), and "Let's follow Gertrude" (4.7.190). However, the same mute Queen, who even defends Claudius against the bellicose revengeful Laertes (4.5.126), converses with Hamlet and these are such moments when her interiority, i.e. her inner thoughts and emotions, is disclosed and gains significance, though different texts of *Hamlet* differ from one another in the scope of disclosing Gertrude's interiority.

Hence, Gertrude's agency is conjectural, and her silence subject to contradictory interpretations, for textual evidence is not lucid as to her concurrence with Hamlet's moralistic advice or to her determination, through reticence, to shun Claudius's several invitations for coition. Unlike Gertrude's suppositional agency, Carol and Trudy are persistent in their objectives. Carol, when persuading her conservative mother, is vociferous in defending her right to remarriage:

Do you think its [sic] been easy for me? Its been terrible. You've no idea. Brian left everything in a mess. I had no idea how much money he had borrowed. And how much the Pub was losing. He never bloody told me. And Ive [sic] had to deal with all this bank stuff on top of everything else. Philip getting into all sorts of trouble at school. Worrying me to death the way hes [sic] been going on. And Alans [sic] been so nice and hes been so kind. (Haig, 2006, p. 229)

Trudy, too, is outspoken in explaining her decisions. Soon after the suspicious death of her husband, she is determined not to rely on any person for the management of the farm, telling her son "Edgar, if we want to keep this place, we have to look like we can do it, right from the start" (Wroblewski, 2009, p. 152). With the death of her husband, Trudy's character gains more refractoriness against the closest family friend, Dr. Papineau and his son who is a sheriff and has to interrogate Edgar as the last person who met Brian before his death. The recurrence of "me" —and its emphatic Italicization in the text—signifies the extent of Trudy's individualistic manners and self-determination:

If something needs taking care of, you talk to me. Me, do you understand...I won't have you and your son making decisions for us. This is our place. Glen, you'll talk to me.... I know you're doing what seems right. But I'm not helpless...I do expect that whatever decisions have to be made will be made by me and no one else. Understood? (p. 151)

Not only is the use of first-person pronouns in the above excerpt the accentuation of Trudy's sense of independence, her resoluteness, and her initiation in decision-making, but the use of emphatic "understood" is meant to impose her decision on, or, at least, to elicit confirmation from, her interlocutors regarding her authority.

The question of female agency can be more elaborated in this part of my analysis with regard to the obligations of women in modern times. To explain their financial hardships, Philip recalls his mother's efforts to provide money for his excursion to Hadrian's Wall. Carol has to suffer humiliation and much dismay in a bureaucratic banking system, moving from one desk and office to another. Philip describes their financial hardship and frustration by juxtaposing the pretentiously polite and helpful manner of the banking staff against the public malaise of the customers:

And I looked round at all of the people and all of the people looked very sad except the people behind the desk and the people in the banks posters and the banks leaflets. All the poster people looked very happy and they all smiled and they had all white behind them like they were in heaven. (Haig, 2006, p. 25)

The banking system is a gigantic system, a leviathan, associated, in Philip's mind, with monstrosity in all respects; he describes them as "big" and "fatso" with "big smile," "robot eyes," "weird shoulders," all signifying the insensate and unsympathetic banking bureaucracy which does nothing but to "swallow" ATM cards and to "squeeze" customers. Philip's mother, dismayed at being officiously treated, regards the banking branch "stupid"

and “bloody” (p. 28). To provide money for Philip’s excursion, his mother has to borrow some from Uncle Alan. Along with financial problems and the hectic task of running a bar, which is on the verge of bankruptcy, Carol has to confront singlehandedly acts of violence, for instance, by thugs, who “smashed all the bottles and the door” (p. 66) and stole the money. Carol is not a heroine with extraordinary talents; when the thugs leave the bar, she is “shaking” and Philip is not, as he recurrently emphasizes, a Spiderman to fight vice: “my body could not move not even my fingers” (pp. 66-7).

With the death of her husband, Trudy also has to shoulder all the responsibilities of managing their farm, but she has no inclination to ask Claude to participate in handling the drudge of breeding dogs and the tiresome task of negotiating and marketing. Trudy gives solace to Edgar and promises him that he—due to the loss of his father and the ensuing financial problems—has not to reside in “a foster home” and reassures him that it is “not going to happen. Nothing is going to happen to me, or you, for that matter” (Wroblewski, 2009, p. 180). Being bedridden by pneumonia and having access to nobody, even to Dr. Papineau, Trudy finally succumbs to Edgar’s insistence on asking Claude—who left the farm before the death of his brother—to return. Nonetheless, both Claude and Dr. Papineau acknowledge the adamant character of Trudy and find having negotiations with her challenging. After his return, Claude is still convinced that he cannot persuade Trudy to accept new arrangements for breeding dogs and passes the responsibility of persuading Trudy to Dr. Papineau, who is not only an old friend but a shareholder, yet the doctor wisely remarks that “With Trudy, it’s better to wait to be asked than to offer an opinion” (p. 310).

Though Carol and Trudy reveal differing limits of female agency, both draw on their own personal abilities to manage their lives and do not seek help until the problems—in the context of a real life—become too onerous to bear singlehandedly. Carol and Trudy are not larger-than-life characters; nor are they exempt from the harsh realities of life throughout the novel; nor does their resoluteness lead to a victorious eventuality in these novels, for both are entrapped in worlds which are darker than they can imagine or control.

3. Conclusion

The text of *Hamlet* has provided several references to Gertrude’s alleged promiscuity, adultery, hypocrisy; as such, the bulk of criticism on Gertrude has been focused on these features though such criticism does not always accord with the male attitudes expressed in the play. Charnes (2006, p. 63), for instance, contends that Gertrude is not an utterly lecherous character, yet *Hamlet* magnifies the evilness of his mother’s lechery, for he can only attain the status of a classical hero if moral turpitude and vice spread throughout the play from Claudius to Gertrude and then to Ophelia. Gertrude’s promiscuity is, according to Kinney (2002, p. 41), inferred from the other characters’ impressions of her, for her lines in the play do not yield an aura of immorality. Stevenson (2002, p. 448) argues that *Hamlet*’s disgust of his mother’s sexuality may not be the consequence of his mother’s lewdness but the result of his apprehensions concerning his mother’s giving birth to a new heir; this implies that it is the possibility of loss of kingship which has enraged *Hamlet*. Sinfield (2006, p. 95) mentions that the emotions of some women characters such as Gertrude are not elemental in the imaginative structure of Shakespearean drama especially during the moments of resolution at the end of the plays.

Despite these critiques on Gertrude which either find her character reprehensibly lewd or attempt to exonerate her and prove her to be a victim of political conflicts within the play and the larger structure of contemporaneous patriarchal attitudes toward women in Shakespeare, the modern revisionings of *Hamlet* have provided a new space in which the figure of Gertrude has been endowed with new facets. Carol in *The Dead Fathers Club* and especially, Trudy in *The story of Edgar Sawtelle* are centralized and both survive, though their survival is accompanied with tragic incidents at the end of both novels. Not only are Trudy and Carol imbued with commonsense and limited agency, and not only do they remain supportive of their sons, but their emotions also gain more centrality toward the end of these two revisioning novels. Ralf Waldo Emerson is convinced that Shakespeare’s “mind is the horizon beyond which...we do not see” (cited in Garber, 2008, p. xvi); and Garber (2008) believes this conviction regarding Shakespeare’s profundity of mind is as sound today as it was in Emerson’s era. As such, modern revisionings of *Hamlet* which demonstrate Gertrude’s commonsense, determination, and motherly devotion cannot be construed as mere responses to masculine mindsets in the Shakespearean text, but also a reaction to modern laudations of Shakespeare and the idea that Shakespeare has bestowed upon us unsurpassable conceptions regarding men, women, and what humanity is.

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Notes

Note 1. All references to *Hamlet* are based on The Arden Shakespeare, edited by Harold Jenkins (1982).