



# Frailty, Thy Name Is Toxic Masculinity Gendered Mimesis of the Power Struggle in *Hamlet*, *Ophelia*, and *The Northman*

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the features of *Hamlet* that allow for a new understanding of the play through gendered mimesis. Long discussed as a revenge tragedy and as an exemplary model of mimesis, *Hamlet* is in itself a deliberate and self-aware remake of earlier iterations of this tale and the revenge tragedy genre, and it has been more or less freely adapted over the centuries across multiple genres. Here two cinematic adaptations will be discussed: *Ophelia* (2018) and *The Northman* (2022), with special focus on the key female characters of Ophelia and Gertrude.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Conflict, Gender, Mimesis, Revenge Tragedy

## 1. Mimesis and Gender

The familial political struggle in *Hamlet* offers the standard by which the genre of revenge tragedy is often measured. Shakespeare himself was responding to the genre well-established by Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and other popular revenge tragedies of early modern London – indeed, *Hamlet* has been called “a highly self-conscious remake of an earlier revenge tragedy (also called *Hamlet*) that had already come to stand synecdochically for the genre” (Deutermann 2011, 247). However, Shakespeare can, in a way, be seen to adapt the genre to suit his dramatic needs much as he adapts the old legend on which the plot of his play is based. *Hamlet*, in its turn, has been adapted in numerous ways over the centuries since it was first staged. By positioning *Hamlet* squarely in the middle of this adaptive process, its mimesis becomes clearer, as demonstrated by the fact that all meaningful adaptations of *Hamlet* have one aspect in common at their core: the familial, political power struggle. The constant amidst changing details and setting reflects the mimetic properties of *Hamlet*'s power struggle. Given that “it is hard to imagine a more charged

concept in Western literary history than that of mimesis” (Kahn 2006, 1), it is vital to consider the mimetic nature of *Hamlet’s* core familial and political power struggle. As part of this new way to examine the relationship between Shakespeare and adaptation, it will be necessary and novel to understand the ways in which *Hamlet* and its adaptations use mimesis in a particularly gendered way. A gendered consideration of mimesis will enable a re-examination of both the constant and the adapted in *Hamlet: Ophelia* and *Gertrude* and the ways in which gendered mimesis allows them to evolve in 21<sup>st</sup> century adaptations. By focusing specifically on the way the key female characters of Ophelia and Gertrude, and the political and familial conflicts in which they are embroiled, evolve through this adaptive process, it will be possible to come to a new understanding: gendered mimesis.

Mimesis can be defined as “the verbal capturing or conveying of experience in such a way as the mental image or meaning created by the words is judged similar, analogous, or even identical to what we know about the world from sense-data directly” (Greene *et al.* 2012, 1171). This summation is useful when thinking about the relationship between mimesis and gender. Judith Butler has famously written a great deal on this subject, considering issues such as “how gender should be experienced” (2001, 2), how gender is performed, and “what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation” (1988, 521) as a result of considering gender as performance. The notion here is that gender is not determined by biology, but instead is mimetically formed through successive iterations of gender and power constructed historically and culturally.

The revenge tragedy genre is sufficiently codified prior to the advent of *Hamlet* that the audience is comfortable with the expectations of how the various plot elements fit together are clear to its first audience. *Hamlet* therefore fits into this definition of mimesis through the political conflict over who will be king, and whether or not that outcome is just, and the familial conflict between father, son, mother, and uncle. Each of these pieces plays a part in setting the stage for an empathetic exemplar of the revenge tragedy genre. Moreover, by considering gendered aspects of the adapted performance of *Hamlet* in *Ophelia* and *The Northman*, a consideration of mimesis akin to Butler’s notions becomes viable.

The power struggle in *Hamlet*, therefore, is a mimesis in that the play is a deliberate response to the revenge tragedy genre and its constituent tropes. While the familial and political power struggles of *Hamlet* and its adaptations match the generic expectations, the ways in which the key female characters fit into this power struggle and are adapted show a constant presence, though with a seismic shift. In order to delve into the relationship that can be seen between gender and mimesis through *Hamlet*, it will be necessary to think about mimesis in a few different ways. There is a tension between the notion that a “conservatizing use of the canon” can “enforce a politics of mimesis, inclusion and exclusion” (Garber 1992, 242) and that mimesis is not just “the object of negative critiques of dramatic art, then; but, rather, mimesis is the subject through which positive and creative possibilities are affirmed via a performative conception of subjective life – this is, in a nutshell, the mimetic hypothesis” (Lawtoo 2018, 310). At this crossroads of conserving the canon and the affirmation of creative possibilities lie adaptations of *Hamlet*. These works adapt Shakespeare’s renowned play into performances that both repeat and respond to traditional readings of the text, showing both the conservative and generative potential of mimesis.

My analysis will consider two 21<sup>st</sup> century examples, which are nevertheless fully recognizable as iterations of *Hamlet: Ophelia* (McCarthy 2018) and *The Northman* (Eggers 2022). My focus will be on the gendered mimesis of the power struggle seen in the family dynamic at the heart of *Hamlet* and these two adaptations. In particular, it is necessary to analyse the way the central conflict is shaped by and addresses what has been considered by many its mi-

sogynistic depictions of women by offering new ways of considering the characters of Ophelia and Gertrude. Furthermore, Gertrude and Ophelia in these two adaptations push back against the readings often given of their Shakespearean iterations in the original context. This focus enables an enlightening analysis of two 21<sup>st</sup> century examples of gendered mimesis taking place.

The *elevator pitch* for *Ophelia* goes something like *we get her side of the story or it's the same story, but from Ophelia's perspective*. As one review of the film states: "there are parallels, and mirrored dualities throughout, and it is not only Ophelia whose character is made more vivid and complex" (Minow 2019). However, the reframing of a narrative inherently changes it. The film (itself an adaptation of a novel of the same name, authored by Lisa Klein) frames the familiar story, with some crucial differences: the audience sees Ophelia's childhood before meeting Hamlet, the course of their relationship, and the new added pieces of what happens when she does not die and what she does after Hamlet's death, including raising their daughter. Thus, the way Ophelia experiences her story and shares it with the audience is inherently outside of Hamlet's purview. Moreover, as the ending of the film shows, the narrative is delivered retrospectively, as a story Ophelia is telling her daughter. The narrator and her temporal relationship with the story are therefore substantively different from Shakespeare's play, perhaps because the story is told retrospectively and "memory is an extremely flexible, constructive process rather than a perfect copy of the past" (Nourkova, Bernstein, and Loftus 2004, 65). Perhaps, however, the perspective Ophelia offers in her film is truly her own from the beginning of the film, when the audience sees her character as a child. Thus, the story told in *Ophelia* is inherently different from the one seen in *Hamlet*; its characters, their interactions, and their relationships are not the ones people know and expect, as established by Shakespeare's play. Moreover, the added character of Mechtild, the surprise identical twin sister of Gertrude offers an expanded set of experiences and insight into the original character's identity, motivations, and emotions. While the mimesis taking place in *Ophelia* is strong and clear, it is also specifically gendered in response to the original: it presents a fundamentally different perspective and set of details to establish the characters and their story. Hence, repetition with a difference. Moreover, the film's titular character, as well as Gertrude (and her new-found sister), clearly pushes back against some of the superficial impressions their characters make in *Hamlet*.

Similarly, *The Northman* offers what would seem to be a deliberate response to Shakespeare's play, offering a *historical Hamlet*, or rather *imagine if Hamlet were a Viking*. In some ways, little has to change. As one reviewer puts it, the reality of this iteration of Hamlet's titular character "is built on clear and emphatic moral lines, on coherent (albeit harsh) ideas about honor, power and what gives meaning to life and death" (Scott 2022), which is not that far off from Shakespeare's take. As vestiges of this perspective linger, many other aspects of the story's perspective shift, not only in time and place but also in character dynamics. For example, the question of how Claudius (Fjölfnir) becomes king when King Hamlet (Aurvandil) dies while Prince Hamlet (Amleth) is very much alive and well is answered differently in settings. While *Ophelia* explains these circumstances with an election, a self-respecting Viking clearly must become king by sending the previous one to Valhalla. Moreover, one of the film's key plot twists hinges on the issue of perspective, indicating that "faulty eyewitness testimony" (Loftus 2013, 556) can indeed be the cause of serious tragedy. Ultimately, the drive for revenge created in *The Northman's* prince shapes his character and his relationships in a fundamentally different way, as dictated by the sociocultural context. The gender roles, as seen in *The Northman's* reading of Gertrude (Gudrún) and Ophelia (Olga), are similarly affected. With this changed context and these altered roles, the constants within these characters, repeated in the face of so many differences, stand out all the more. Thus, the gendered mimesis seen in this adaptation offers a

fundamental shift in perspective to the early modern play. Gudrún and Olga push back against the traditional readings and expectations of their characters in Shakespeare's text.

Finally, this notion of gendered mimesis in *Hamlet* is made possible in part by the ways in which ambiguity and confusion invite the audience to judge the characters and the morality of their actions when it comes to revenge, survival, and fulfillment. Many scholars have talked about the idea of the audience serving as the jury for the legal issues of early modern drama, particularly in Shakespeare's. Notable examples of such scholarship include Joel Altman (1978, 280-82), Phyllis Rackin (1985), Lorna Hutson (2011, 69-70), and Syme (2012, 78-81). This notion of audience as jury, when considered in concert with the ambiguity and confusion of the moral issues at stake in *Hamlet*, reflects a connection to mimesis discussed by William Nest: "the Elizabethan concern with the themes and practices of confusion shows a change in the process through which dramatic mimesis was understood to function, and therefore how it did function, in the early period of public playing – a change, in other words, of the protocols that supported mimetic practices" (2008, 220). This change in mimetic practices is repeated, with an emphasis on gender, in both *Ophelia* and *The Northman*, and it demonstrates a new form of gendered mimesis.

## 2. *Ophelia in Ophelia*

The opening shot of *Ophelia* indicates that visually this take on the famous character relies on Millais's famous painting. The audience is shown how someone else, long ago, imagined this Shakespearean heroine, indicating once again the importance of the perspective of the storyteller. For audience members familiar with Shakespeare's famous tragedy, this opening shot temporally places the story as well – if Ophelia is already in the water, the bulk of Shakespeare's narrative has already taken place. The story is then visually telegraphed as a flashback from the first moment. It is unclear from this first shot if Ophelia is dead, which plays into one of the key twists of this adaptation. This lack of clarity, this murkiness around her character's death or survival also speaks to the issue of "playing dead," which "poses eschatological and ontological challenges" (Lodhia 2009, 135). This issue ties Ophelia's tragedy into the frameworks conceived by revenge plays such as *Hamlet*. The frame of *Ophelia*, as the title suggests, shifts the perspective; the film is now a response to all the ways in which Ophelia has been previously visualized and enacted. This iteration of the story will be hers as she reflects back on her life as the adaptation's narrator, surviving after Shakespeare's curtain falls.

Much is made of Ophelia's social status in this reading of her character. As the daughter of Polonius, Ophelia is often portrayed as one of the noble women of court – her status is traditionally not inferior to that of other courtiers who appear in the play. However, here, emphasis is placed on two factors: her clandestine education and her place as one of the queen's ladies. Early on, the audience is shown young Ophelia, closed off from the school room to which Laertes and Hamlet and other worthy boys are granted admittance. Laertes promises to teach Ophelia what he learns later, but the hunger in her eyes as she looks through the grating of the closed door speaks to her eager yearning. When the adult Ophelia is later able to read to the queen, a skill none of the other ladies have, it is clear that her tenacious passion for learning in the face of the dictate that only boys receive education has paid off. In this moment, and in many others, the ladies find ways of humbling Ophelia, including commenting on her attire, her poverty, and her odor. The intellectual skill set she shares with the queen alone seems to single her out in a positive way. The persistence and intelligence of this Ophelia are consequently highlighted by the social dynamics of this interpretation of her character. Ophelia can thus be

seen as a mixture of styles, both high and low. Auerbach's work on mimesis "rejects the idea that the mixture of the high and the low will result in a sort of middle or intermediate level of style," but it has been noted previously that the two stylistic levels, high and low, "are juxtaposed or arranged in the form of antitheses" (Doran 2007, 358) in Shakespeare's work. Ophelia and her descendent *Ophelia* offer just such a juxtaposition: canonical Shakespeare is reimagined as a 21<sup>st</sup> century film, repeated, but altered – specifically with an emphasis on gender. The alterations moreover constitute a sufficiently significant rebuttal to be deemed a form of gendered mimesis.

In Shakespeare's play, much regarding Ophelia's relationships is left unscrutinised. In particular, the beginning of her relationship with Hamlet is not established. It is instead alluded to as a contributing factor in her madness when he spurns her. This adaptation places an emphasis on their relationship – the audience sees them in each other's company in a general way when they are both children, and upon Hamlet's return from his studies abroad, a scene is added specifically to show them meeting as adults. Notably, Ophelia is bathing in the same body of water seen in the opening shot – the same one in which her apparent suicide will take place. Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship develops gradually over the course of the film, drawing to a head in the "get thee to a nunnery" scene. This one makes multiple interesting adaptive choices for more clearly understanding this reading of the characters. Not only is the dialogue interpreted as a conscious performance for their concealed listeners, but a second layer of conversation is added in whispers, their actual interaction underneath the performative one. The illusion, then, of a sane conversation concealed in an insane one; fits into this ongoing analysis of mimesis, which is "construed as lifelikeness, or likeness to an essential and unvarying 'nature'" (Hutson 2006, 80). The illusion created in this moment furthers the film's gendered mimesis of Ophelia in that although the structure and function of the scene stay the same, repeated as it has been for hundreds of years, new meaning is added, pushing back at the traditional notions of confusion and helplessness which so often dog interpretations of Ophelia in this moment of the play. Moreover, the two levels of this conversation serve as a metaphor for the dynamic between Shakespeare's play and this film: Shakespeare's play is what everyone hears while this is the real story, known only to those involved. The audience sees a different Ophelia through her relationships in this film, notably with Hamlet, and even in the quiet moment of reading she shares with Gertrude already discussed.

Act IV, scene V of *Hamlet* is often termed "Ophelia's mad scene", because without any insight into her thought process or a full understanding of what led her to this moment, no other interpretation is truly possible. In this interpretation of the scene, however, Ophelia's intentions are clear and her thought process is well calculated. Hamlet is often credited for being deceitful, or at least ambiguous, while Ophelia is usually seen as honest and open. However, "just as Hamlet and all men are not to be believed, neither is Ophelia – nor any woman" (Kottman 2009, 37). This pithy analysis of Hamlet and Ophelia as archetypes of their respective genders highlights the message the film gives its audience here: all is not as it has traditionally seemed with Ophelia. She means to escape Claudius and Elsinore hopefully with Hamlet, but without him if necessary. Her "madness" is a ruse designed to inspire leniency. It works: she is allowed to leave the scene, followed on Claudius's orders, but not returned to prison. This cunning trick, far from foreshadowing her suicide as in the original, enables her happy ending with her daughter away from the violence and intrigue of court life. By keeping the substance of Act IV, Scene V intact and merely changing the contextual framing, this Ophelia pushes back against the notion that a relationship gone south would be enough for this intelligent and insightful woman to cease wanting to live.

While other iterations of Ophelia have examined her suicide as the tragic conclusion of the character's tenuous mental health, this reading rejects such attempts at narrative control.

This Ophelia is so firmly in charge of her destiny, she finds a way to forge a future for herself by seeming to kill herself. This seeming demise allows her the ultimate freedoms of anonymity and self-determination. The origins of mimesis present an interesting point here. Given that “Plato invented mimesis as a degraded copy, at two removes from the truth, a magical illusion that seduces the audience to succumb in turn to imitative behavior” (Kahn 2006, 1), this feigned suicide can be seen as a degraded copy of the real event, which is apparent in Shakespeare’s text. Ophelia’s survival could be a magical illusion, wish fulfillment of previous *Hamlet* audiences. Yet, at the same time, this film offers a new performance of Ophelia that inherently stands on its own. While *Ophelia* is inescapably an adaptation of *Hamlet*, the deliberate choices made in this 21<sup>st</sup> century film to focus on Ophelia offer a new kind of mimesis: a gendered one.

The ending of *Ophelia* makes it clear that she is the focus of this film – in case the title had not already sufficiently declared this to be the case. She reclaims the narrative, telling the story from her perspective to her daughter, Hamlet’s daughter, whose existence he dies without learning of. In the final shot, we see their daughter running, wooden sword in hand through a grassy field. The juxtaposition of peace and conflict encompassed in the body of a small, energetic girl with her future ahead of her embodies the response to *Hamlet* presented by *Ophelia*. When told from another perspective, her story gives new life to this famous revenge tragedy, giving voice to a character who, while often interpreted and close-read, is never the focus of Shakespeare’s text.

### 3. Gertrude in Ophelia

To properly understand Gertrude in *Hamlet*, it is vital to know how her backstory is being played. For one thing, the nature of her marriage with King Hamlet very much affects how her swift remarriage upon his death to Claudius reads. Also of importance are the circumstances of her marriage to Claudius and the degree of happiness it brings her. Finally, her relationship with her son provides important insight into the ways in which their relationship develops. In this interpretation, Gertrude’s relationship with Ophelia is also a key factor in understanding the former’s role as queen and mother. The ways in which *Ophelia* interprets these key issues regarding Gertrude push back against possible interpretations of Shakespeare’s play enabled by the shift in narrative control of the text. This issue of narrative control speaks to the role of adaptation, both from source material to text and from text to performance. W.B. Worthen has noted that “theater is not a vehicle for textual transmission. Stage performance uses writing not to communicate with words to an audience, but to create those problematic performatives of the stage, the entwining of the fictive in the actual, the drama in the performers’ *doing*, that animates (our appetite for) acting” (2011, 333). It could therefore be argued that part of the draw of this adaptation of Gertrude is not just to see how Shakespeare’s character is performed, but also how the way in which she is written adapts Shakespeare’s text and how this actress brings that adaptation to life.

While Gertrude’s marriage to King Hamlet in this interpretation does not seem to be particularly happy, neither does it seem particularly troubling. Although Hamlet shows a troubling lack of interest in his wife, Gertrude only seems to respond when she is repeatedly approached by Claudius. Claudius, indeed, goes so far as to kiss Gertrude clearly without her consent. While she later gives in, the narrative is clear: although not well-satisfied romantically by her marriage, Gertrude did not seem to have any interest in abandoning it until infidelity was pushed on her by Claudius. Their relationship is established from the outset, therefore, as one of calculation preying on loneliness. Gertrude’s relationship with her son is perfectly straightforward: he is a young man, outgrowing the tending of his mother. This desolation in

turn creates an even larger gap in her affection which Claudius exploits. All of these factors weigh in the audience's judgment of Gertrude's moral decisions both throughout the film and at its conclusion. Absent from *Hamlet's* final act is a common law trial, the early modern staple of justice. This adaptation stays true to Shakespeare in this regard, offering insight into the ways in which "the representational arsenal of early modern drama" is "clearly well suited to critiquing judicial systems that fail to follow common law procedure and as a consequence fail to produce just verdicts" (Syme 2012, 72). Moreover, "given the general investment in the common law trial as the guarantor of justice [...] undelivered mimetic promises prove particularly problematic" (76). *Ophelia's* Gertrude can therefore be seen as a meticulously plotted response to the Gertrude of Shakespeare's original play. When she realizes the full extent of Claudius's depravity, she has the honor of running a sword through his chest. While certainly this moment is no verdict of a common law trial, it offers the audience a clear verdict on the mimesis of Gertrude offered by *Ophelia*.

In case it was not sufficiently clear from these initial facts, Claudius is discovered to be the true villain, not only of this story, but of one which came before it too. At some point prior to the plot established by Shakespeare, Claudius had a serious affair with Gertrude's sister, Mechtild, mirroring perhaps the relationship she has with the two brothers in Shakespeare's original design. Gertrude's sister, in fact, is her identical twin (twins are of course a very Shakespearean device) and appears as a character in her own right. Mechtild's existence is perhaps a prime example of a mimetic reading serving as a "forensic" one in that *Ophelia*, by "planting clues" (Dolan 2008, 358) as to this mysterious new character's identity, invites the readers directly into the mystery. Her backstory connects with that of Claudius as she became pregnant with his child, miscarried, and was called a witch for this tragedy. It is later revealed that Claudius was the one who started the rumors of witchcraft to vilify his lover and to perhaps prevent a marriage with her. Mechtild fakes her death in such a way that sparks Ophelia's plan of escape later on, before making a life for herself as a wise woman in the woods. All these details are revealed slowly, damning Claudius further and offering a new perspective on Gertrude through the vehicle of this new character.

The fact that the twins, Gertrude and Mechtild, are identical – and played by the same actress – contributes to the notion that they are two sides of the same woman. Arguably, mirroring the "blackness" Shakespeare's "Gertrude sees in her own soul" (Kottman 2009, 37), which ultimately the audience of Shakespeare's character might perceive as well. By adding the character of Mechtild, and interpreting her as a facet of Gertrude, a more nuanced understanding of Claudius's villainy is possible. Through her character, Gertrude's ending is reclaimed too: she dies in Mechtild's arms, having killed Claudius with the poisoned sword he gave Laertes to use on Hamlet, as Mechtild leads in Fortinbras and the attacking army. The tragedy becomes Gertrude's, hers and her sisters', as they together vanquish Claudius and his kingdom, achieving revenge for his crimes against them and the country.

The repetition of Gertrude's body in the person of Mechtild is a literal embodiment of the notion that not only may audiences "interpret a performance they see in a range of ways", but also that even though "the performance itself is not an interpretation of the play", "it can be made to function in that capacity in a critical argument" (Worthen 2011, 333). The doubling of Gertrude's face and body through the medium of her twin sister doubles the range of interpretation possible for audiences. Moreover, adding Mechtild is one of *Ophelia's* central adaptive choices, making it part of the "critical argument" of this adaptation. The ways in which Mechtild can be interpreted within the film are as numerous as the ways in which *Ophelia* can be analysed as an adaptation of *Hamlet*.

Another of the key additions offered by the film to this complex web of relationships is Gertrude's connection to Ophelia. Discovered by Gertrude while running wild and outspoken through the castle as a child, Ophelia becomes something of a project for Gertrude. Gertrude takes her on as one of her ladies, instructing her by example and through the context of this relationship. Thus, Ophelia is part servant and part friend, exemplifying a delicate balance of socioeconomic status which at once includes her in court life and excludes her from the more refined circles. The moments of interaction the audience is given between Ophelia and Gertrude highlight what they bring out in each other: their shared intelligence and consequential discontent from the roles they have been assigned to fill. One moment which particularly highlights this dynamic is the one in which Ophelia reads to Gertrude. These are the only two women at court who can read and they delight in the freedom it gives them and the imaginative worlds it inspires. Through Ophelia, the audience is allowed to see another side of Gertrude, the side suppressed by traditional readings of her character which tend to focus on her son, her first husband, or her second husband.

#### 4. *Female Power Struggle*

*Ophelia* therefore can be seen as a deliberately gendered response to *Hamlet*. The two main female characters are given new narratives, new relationships, and ultimately new identities. There is a power struggle implicit in this response to *Hamlet*: by allowing the women to participate in the tragedy in new ways, they are given new power and new meaning. Shakespeare's familiar story is repeated, but with key differences imposed, creating a struggle between the dueling narratives of *Hamlet* and *Ophelia*. Robert Doran, writing about Auerbach's *Mimesis*, considers the way in which mimesis and social change are related, stating: "[...] it is not a matter of deciding whether literature is an expression or instigator of social change. What is important to Auerbach is how human reality shows itself at a particular moment, and how this particular moment is related to other moments and to the historical whole" (2007, 360). The narrative of *Hamlet* evolved up to and including Shakespeare's play, which in turn has changed and changed again in various adaptations. While the 2018 film will certainly never replace Shakespeare's masterpiece, it layers meaning on top of it, both within the film and externally as an adaptive response to the text. By holding the struggles imagined for these women in the twenty-first century up to those in the centuries-old play, Shakespeare itself can be read differently. The familiar, familial and political power struggles are imbued with new tension and new beginnings.

#### 5. *Ophelia in The Northman*

Like *Ophelia*, *The Northman* makes its intentions clear with its title: Hamlet, or rather Amleth, is a man and he is from the north. The mimesis here can therefore be seen "as a reconstruction of the totality of the fictional world following the model of the real world" (Kubíček 2006, 199). Shakespeare's early modern Denmark, based on a far older Viking tale (possibly Saxo Grammaticus's *Historia Danica*), has always been a narrative out of time and space – no particular year and not particularly Danish. Yet, through its attempt to reconstruct those details in its adapted narrative, *The Northman* fits into this particular notion of mimesis. However, while the film seems to style itself as a Viking action piece focused on its titular character's quest for revenge, the women in the film subvert the expectations of their Shakespearean counterparts. Ophelia presents the biggest change in this regard. Here, her name is Olga; she is neither a Viking nor an inhabitant of the court. Amleth only meets her after he is grown and has left his



home to prepare for his revenge. This delay and change in setting allows total freedom for the definition of Olga's character. She is not constrained by the status or expectations established by Shakespeare. Here, she is constrained in another way: she is a slave from the east and she first interacts with Amleth when he is pretending to be one too in order to further his revenge. This meeting sets them on equal footing: their status is the same. Yet their lives and their bodies are not their own: Olga is a slave and Amleth is thrall to his revenge.

One of the most striking parts about Olga from her introduction onward is her affinity for magic. As with other aspects of the movie, her skills walk the fine line between the believable and the paranormal. Regardless of which side she ends up on, the purpose of spending time on this aspect of her character is to show her potency. Although she is not a warrior, Olga is imbued with talents that make her an active participant in the plot. Moreover, her magic fits in with Francis Bacon's notion that "revenge is a kind of wild justice" (1999, 10). There is a wildness not only in Olga's magic and her use of it, but also in her refusal to be constrained by her enslavement. She takes it as a matter of course that she will be free and she will have her revenge – her magic simply makes sure the audience is in no doubt of her capability to see the fulfillment of her desires.

Even for a particularly gory, violent Viking film, there was one scene with blood which nevertheless stands out: when Olga wipes her menstrual blood on Fjölfnir's face to prove she has her period so he will not want to rape her. Men voluntarily put the blood of others on their bodies throughout the movie, but this is different, of course. Menstrual blood is not manly, action movie blood. Furthermore, the context given makes it clear that Fjölfnir's desire is not particular to Olga. Yes, she is new and attractive, but she is his slave and that makes her his to use however he pleases – it is a transaction more about power than desire. While there is more than enough rape throughout this film as a testament of the hypermasculine power of the conqueror, as the right of the hero, this one alone is fought off – not with brute strength, but with femininity. She uses his disgust of menstruation against him, asserting her dominance over her body. Even more shocking than Olga's use of her period in this way is that the audience actually sees the taboo blood, first on Olga's legs and then on her hand and on Fjölfnir's face. The newness of this addition to the violence and gore typical of the revenge genre seems to almost call for inclusion into the annals of "postclassical revenge cinema" (Ma 2015, 66). This astonishing moment, moreover, is an assertion that can be seen to echo the mad scene in Shakespeare – it is easy to call a woman crazy who is acting outside the way men desire.

The American Psychological Association considers insanity to be when one is "suffering from a mental disorder or neurological defect that impairs one's ability to understand or appreciate one's acts or to conform to the requirements of the law" ("Sanity", APA 2022). The first part of this definition applies to Shakespeare's Ophelia, while the second is relevant for *The Northman's* Olga. Act IV, scene V of *Hamlet* leaves the audience with little doubt that Ophelia lacks the ability to understand – certainly she cannot be clearly or easily understood. She is suffering, she is disordered. Olga, however, is organized and forceful. Instead of feeling fear at the attempted rape, she delivers a calculated response with a dark form of glee. Nevertheless, she acts outside the requirements of the law, which, if not explicitly written, clearly indicate that slaves must obey their masters. From Fjölfnir's perspective, Olga therefore has some sort of mental issue which keeps her from understanding her place. Where he sees madness, the audience sees tenacity. Many attempts to reclaim Ophelia's madness away from various designations of weakness and pity have been attempted over the years, but this willfulness combined with the rarely seen cinematic depiction of menstrual blood goes a long way to defend Olga's character. Certainly, it is hard to imagine a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, particularly without an understanding of Ophelia as

her source material, seeing Olga as “insane”. Furthermore, the mimesis at work in this moment of the narrative “also engages [...] theories of representation to performance” (Kahn 2006, 1). The cycle of repetition here turns away from *Hamlet*, but perhaps stays true to Ophelia.

The film seems to offer an ending initially with Amleth and Olga literally sailing off together. Revenge has been exacted, although it is imperfect structurally – which will be discussed in the next section. One key piece of information makes Amleth change his mind: he discovers that Olga is pregnant. As a result of this revelation, Amleth believes his children, his legacy will not be safe unless the revenge is utter and final. Far from drowning, Olga lives when every other significant character dies. Moreover, she sails away to bear Amleth’s twins in safety. Amleth’s change of heart in this moment is in many ways the mirror image of the choice Ophelia makes in Shakespeare: “Ophelia acts ‘honorably’ in disowning her ties to Hamlet for the sake of obeying Polonius, in order to maintain her family’s nobility and estate” (Kottman 2009, 36). Here, Amleth leaves Olga, knowing that he is returning to his death, but equally knowing that he is thereby preserving his future family and his family’s future. In particular, Amleth perceives, prior to his departure, a specific future for the female twin: she will be the prophesied Maiden King. Revenge tragedy, *Hamlet* included, does not usually end with a promise of a return of Hamlet’s dynasty. Elsinore is lost to Fortinbras; Hamlet’s line ends with him. Ophelia never sees Act V. This ending for Olga as a mother and for her daughter as Hamlet’s future restored reclaims the tragedy thrust upon the women of *Hamlet*.

## 6. *Gertrude in The Northman*

The backstory created for Gertrude, or rather, Gudrún, performs two monumental tasks: it gives Shakespeare’s queen agency and it complicates the Oedipal readings of her dynamic with Hamlet which dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The backstory is saved for a late-in-the-game reveal, as Amleth is in control of the narrative from the beginning. It is only at the end when he is finally alone with his mother again that she reveals the truth: she was a slave and Amleth’s father, King Aurvandil, owned her and raped her, impregnating her with Amleth. She plotted with Fjölfnir to arrange the deaths of her first husband and son and has been living in contentment with Fjölfnir and her replacement son all the time Amleth has been away, plotting his revenge. As far as Shakespeare goes, it has long been debated what Gertrude knew and when she knew it, her degree of complicity and her degree of satisfaction. For Hamlet, “his mother’s honor (her position as Queen) is inseparable from her shamelessness” (Kottman 2009, 37). Gudrún offers a different but equally clear position: she, rather than Fjölfnir, was the real instigator of Aurvandil’s assassination. More, she even green-lit Amleth’s murder. Not only does this backstory provide Gudrún with the clear identity and purpose that Gertrude can be seen to lack, it also adds complexity to her relationship with Amleth. Gudrún’s bombshell of a revelation asks two very important questions of the audience with regards to revenge and justice: “How do we decide whom and what to believe? What factors are most influential in forming our opinion?” (Holmes 2019, 151), both of which have different answers throughout the film depending on who is answering them and who is in the audience.

At multiple points, the suggestion of Freudian overtones is offered in Amleth’s relationship with Gudrún. However, rather than “merely reworking conventions that were quickly becoming shopworn”, *The Northman*’s allusions to Freudian readings of *Hamlet* are perhaps “indicative of a deeper conviction about the meaning” (Ross-Kilroy 2010, 52), perhaps even specifically speaking to the way in which the use of these elements aids in the shaping of the text as a revenge tragedy. The specific and through reading has multiple components. First, in terms of casting, Kidman is only 9 years older than Skarsgård and they look similar enough in age that they recently played

a married couple. Second, one of the film's first shots is Amleth bursting into his mother's bedroom while she is dressing to let her know that his father, her husband, has returned. She is in the process of dressing and the shot reveals this by showing a great deal of Kidman's unclothed body. Third, Amleth chooses Olga – the only woman we see him show interest of any kind in, other than his mother – and both Amleth and Fjölfnir indicate how much Olga looks like a young Gudrún. Finally, in the scene where Gudrún reveals her backstory to Amleth, she kisses him and he seems to kiss her back. While Gudrún's sexual overtures towards Amleth begin before she realizes who he is, she only gets more explicit after realising she is talking to her son. She even says Amleth can be her next king. Thus, Amleth and Gudrún's relationship would initially seem to satisfy the basic requirements of an Oedipal reading of *Hamlet*.

However, within the context of Gudrún's backstory, the interpretation of this dynamic inherently shifts. While Amleth is surely obsessed with his mother, and her bombshell destroys his perfectly plotted and routinely announced revenge: "I will avenge you, Father. I will save you, Mother. I will kill you, Fjölfnir", Gudrún's actions in her final scene with Amleth take on new meaning. She was a slave, kept captive in an untenable condition with her husband as her owner and rapist and her son as a constant reminder of her trapped state. Fjölfnir was her way out. This revelation is indicative of the notion that "the extreme expressions of violence elicited by revenge cannot be understood as a mere effect of the collapse of a stable framework of values, as though a return to moral clarity could restore some semblance of order" (Ma 2015, 66). The moral clarity of this time, place, and society is at such a great distance from that of a film audience in 2022 that it is hard to imagine what the value system would be in this context to fairly serve as justice for Gudrún and her actions. Neither of her marriages, nor her actions, are on strong moral footing by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, but she chose the one with Fjölfnir and they seem to be on equal footing in terms of their understanding and their partnership. She clearly adores the son they share, who has more than replaced the son she gave up for slaughter. It is a cruel world Gudrún inhabits, but she makes the best choices she can to make a better life for herself in this violent, patriarchal world. As such, when she sees Amleth first as an anonymous conqueror of Fjölfnir and then as her avenging first born son, she does not hesitate. She will play him regardless of who he is, determined to save herself by any means necessary. In this moment, Gudrún exemplifies the "high point [...] of mimesis" seen in "revenge tragedy" (49) such as *Hamlet*.

Ultimately, Gudrún possesses a determination and an instinct for self-preservation that Shakespeare's hapless Gertrude lacks, especially in her manner of death. Whether viewed as suicide or as an unfortunate error, Gertrude does not hold a candle to the tenacity and courage of Gudrún. When it comes right down to it, Gudrún defends herself and her second son, Amleth's half-brother, Gunnar by taking on Amleth in armed combat. She knows there is no way she will win the altercation, but while Gertrude sits and watches the final duel in *Hamlet*, Gudrún refuses to be relegated to the sidelines.

While the final duel in *The Northman* has no spectators, it certainly follows the established pattern of revenge tragedies that the "final scenes tend to be spectacularly metatheatrical" with "the revenger's long-concealed hatred" "finally released" in displays of "catastrophic, near-apocalyptic destruction" (Deutermann 2011, 248). Indeed, what could be more indicative of this description than a naked sword fight inside a volcano? However, in *The Northman*, Gudrún's demise is separated from the mutual destruction of Amleth and Fjölfnir. This separation allows for her death, and that of her second son, at Amleth's hands to take center stage at the resolution of her personal revenge tragedy. Rather than seeing this division or focus as a moment of "mimetic arbitrariness", by reading it as a referendum on the notion of justice, a new interpretation can be seen. Syme remarks that:

[...] the division between real-world and theatrical procedures may be precisely what renders early modern plays so enduringly powerful in their treatment of issues of justice and injustice. In imagining worlds where the *legal* means of doing justice are either unattainable or systemically flawed, early modern playwrights also had to represent, debate, and put into play extra-legal notions of justice. (2012, 85)

From this perspective, Gudrún, Amleth, Fjölnir, Aurvandil, Olga, and all other participants in this revenge tragedy serve as moving parts in the mimesis of *Hamlet*, the justice of this adaptation, and the audience's ability to recognize and respond to the injustices enacted in the narrative.

### 7. *Hamlet's Daughters*

The women of *The Northman* do not participate in the prolonged, one-shot fight scenes littered with blood and savagery. Only tangentially are they even on screen during these conflicts, these struggles for political power, social capital, resources, and slaves. When they are on screen in these shots, they are one of the resources: they are raped and enslaved. They have no identity beyond this commodification. Olga and Gudrún struggle for power in their own ways, and arguably exemplify the most lasting success by taking these different routes. Olga manages to avoid rape, make the best of captivity, marry for love, and escape to create a new life for herself. Gudrún manages all of that too – except the first part, and fights to the death while Olga sails off into the future. Death is not the worst fate for a Viking though, and given the manner of Gudrún's death, she would seem to have earned a place in Valhalla. Moreover, Olga and Gudrún struggle for power in ways distinct from their male counterparts, whether through scheming, magic, childbearing, or ultimately, knowledge, which “is never unbiased or undetermined, nor ever unimpeded” (Fosso 2012, 49). Olga and Gudrún therefore hold a special place in the mimesis at work in *The Northman*: they create a particular, gendered mimesis.

In both *Ophelia* and *The Northman*, the future, beyond Hamlet's revenge tragedy, is female. *Hamlet* has been termed “a long, magnificently articulated cry of emotional pain and moral indignation”, with an emphasis on the notion that Hamlet is “mortally hurt in his inmost feelings” and that he “clings to an imaginative ideal of courage, honor, dignity, and chivalrous love” (Carroll 2010, 253). This reading of Shakespeare's most famous revenger meets with a gendered mimesis in *Ophelia* and *The Northman*. In Shakespeare, Hamlet “insists again and again that mere words cannot fathom his feeling, that his inner life is ultimately inexpressible” (Knecht 2015, 44), but in these two adaptations, the words and the future are taken out of his hands. Both, in a way, are given to his daughter(s). Hamlet's daughter in *Ophelia* seems to offer an opportunity for peace. She may never know she was born a princess, but even in just one shot, her idyllic life makes a compelling case for her happiness regardless of her status. Ophelia looks happy, perhaps for the first time, too – or at the very least, she looks at peace. Amleth's daughter, however, is still in utero as the film ends and is only seen as a vision, the first woman on the family tree which recurs throughout the film at key moments. She is called the Maiden King, a title comprising both her femininity and her potency. The indication that her father's mutual demise with Fjölnir has wiped the slate of revenge clean and that she can return to conquer her birthright in the future. Interestingly, no mention is made of her brother's destiny, though Olga is carrying them both. This omission even in the celebration of his sister's future undermines the division of sexes laid out in every *Hamlet* from Shakespeare to *The Northman*. In this conclusion, there is a reclamation of power so long denied and a future prophesied where a woman will have the chance to be the arbiter of peace or of revenge.

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