Grieving Women in Hamlet and The Tragedy of Mariam

Abstract
I explore how two early modern plays, Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam, depict grief as feminized emotion. I consider how Shakespeare uses women as mediums for grief and how Cary gives female characters power through their subversive emotional expression. First, I contextualize my two case studies by providing historical information about grief in its various forms, including contemporary medical theories, philosophical views, religious tracts, and cultural perspectives. I expand current scholarship by focusing on how women are feminized through their emotions and how those emotions enable transgressive behavior, impacting what early modern grief is and does. By engaging six powerful female characters across two early modern tragedies, I challenge scholars who argue that early moderns had a strictly scientific evaluation of emotion. By exposing the various forces at work in early modern grief, I contend that grief emboldens women in subversive ways that distinguish them from men and empowers them through expression. I then focus on Hamlet’s feminized insults towards women as evidence of his own repressed grief regarding his father’s death. Finally, I shift emphasis from women as prototypes for male grief and look at the emotional capabilities of two female characters, Mariam and her mother Alexandra, who demonstrate emotional agency in The Tragedy of Mariam. By centering my research on grief, an emotion that was most commonly restricted to women, I contribute to this significant research area by arguing that women actively proscribed the early modern notions of grief, even as they were limited to this allowed outlet. Paradoxically, women redefined grief prescribed to them by men as an active, empowering emotion. Male characters look to women as authorities on grief and view women as mediums for their grief; however, women often embody grief to transgress cultural norms. Ultimately, I cast grief not as a passive emotion, but a strongly active response to tragedy, exposing women’s often overlooked, hidden power on the early modern stage and in the pages of closet drama.

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Subject
grief
female
passions
mourning
agency
female
sadness
mother
misogyny
Gertrude
Hecuba
Alexandra
Herod
Niobe
tears
power
patriarchy
affects
tragedy
emotion
Regarding Hamlet's Gertrude Angela Pitt in "Women in Shakespeare's Tragedies" comments that Shakespeare's Gertrude in Hamlet is, first and foremost, a mother: Gertrude evinces no such need to justify her actions and thereby does not betray any sense of guilt. She is concerned with her present good fortune, and neither lingers over the death of her first husband nor analyses her motives in taking another. . . . She seems a kindly, slow-witted, rather self-indulgent… Show More. Shakespeare's Hamlet - Regarding Gertrude Essay. 1965 Words | 8 Pages. Regarding Hamlet’s Gertrude In William Shak