

**Subverting *Hamlet* through Re-writing: Sexual and Gender
Politics of the Mother in Howard Barker's *Gertrude-The Cry***
Hamlet'i Yeniden Yazma Yoluyla Yıkmak: Howard Barker'ın *Gertrude-The Cry*
Oyununda Annenin Cinsel ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Politikası

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Abstract

In Howard Barker's *Gertrude-The Cry* (2002), all the things most popularly known about Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* are subverted and transformed to a great extent. In this adaptation, the title character of the source text is changed from Hamlet to Gertrude, who is presented as a villainous woman in *Hamlet* with her potential involvement in her husband's murder and subsequent marriage to Claudius. Barker alters the status of Hamlet as the tragic hero and makes his mother the new heroine of the play who does not conform to any of the norms set for her in Shakespeare's text. Instead, Gertrude behaves as a woman extremely driven by erotic desire towards several male characters in the play. This paper analyses Barker's rewriting as an attempt to challenge the norms of womanhood represented in conventional literary works. The transformations in Barker's version are also related to women's role and status in society at the time the play was written. Regarding the dominant ideas of the play such as personal will and sexual liberation in light of the relevant legislations of the New Labour as the ruling party in Britain in the early years of the twenty-first century, Barker's play is also discussed as a politically driven adaptation.

Keywords: Howard Barker, *Gertrude-The Cry*, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, New Labour

Öz

Howard Barker'ın *Gertrude-The Cry* (2002) adlı oyunu Shakespeare'in en popüler oyunu *Hamlet* hakkında bilinen her şeyi altüst eder ve büyük ölçüde dönüştürür. Bu uyarlamada, kaynak metnin ana karakteri Hamlet yerine, kocasının katline olası katkısı ve Claudius ile evlenmesiyle Shakespeare'in *Hamlet*'inde kötü bir kadın olarak sunulan Gertrude'dur. Barker, Hamlet'in trajik kahraman statüsünü değiştirir ve annesini Shakespeare'in metninde kendisi için belirlenen normların hiçbirine uymayan oyunun yeni kahramanı yapar. Bu uyarlamadaki Gertrude, oyunun birkaç erkek karakterine karşı aşırı derecede erotik arzuyla dolu bir kadındır. Bu makale, Barker'ın yeniden yazımını geleneksel edebî eserlerde temsil edilen kadınlık normlarına meydan okuma girişimi olarak analiz etmektedir. Barker'ın versiyonundaki dönüşümler, oyunun yazıldığı dönemde kadının toplumdaki rolü ve statüsüyle de ilişkilendirilmektedir. 21. yy.'ın ilk yıllarında İngiltere'de hâkim olan Yeni İşçi Hükümeti'nin düzenlemeleri ışığında, bireysel irade ve cinsel özgürlük gibi konuları ele alması bakımından Barker'ın eseri politik güdümlü bir uyarlama olarak da tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Howard Barker, *Gertrude-The Cry*, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, New Labour

Introduction

Howard Barker is one of the innovative playwrights of contemporary British drama with his sensational plays. In his *Theatre of Catastrophe*, which is “a form of tragedy that refuses catharsis or moral enlightenment” (Kilpatrick 704), he renders difficult subjects endowed with startling characterisation. One of the ways he succeeds in confronting his audience with challenging plays is by rewriting some canonical plays. Two Shakespeare adaptations, *Seven Lears* (1990) and *Gertrude-The Cry* (2002), exemplify Barker’s “art of theatre” that aims to provide amoral plays with no deliberate messages or solutions whatsoever. This paper focuses on *Gertrude-The Cry* and argues that Barker’s re-writing of Shakespeare subverts the norms upheld in the source text and also suggests that the criticism of patriarchy extends to the dominant norms and practices observed in Britain at the time of the play’s production. Rewritten texts need to be discussed in relation to the social, historical, and political contexts in which they are written to analyse the specific motivations behind the alterations made to the text. As a play written in 2002, Barker’s work challenges some of the conservative practices of the New-Labour government led by Tony Blair such as family, parenthood, and patriarchal values by portraying an overly sexual woman that is far from realising her duties as a mother and as a wife in a traditional sense. In the final analysis, it is observed that Barker’s play poses a challenge both to the source text and to its context by presenting a woman that does not comply with the upheld norms of the state and confronts limitations on sexual freedom.

Why *Hamlet*?

R. A. Foakes acknowledges that *Hamlet* is seen by most as “the best, the greatest, or the chief masterpiece of Shakespeare” (1). However, Barker’s impulse to rewrite this play does not seem to have any relation to the work’s canonical status, rather, his adaptation is a critical response to the source play’s treatment of topics such as femininity, sexuality, and morality. Barker explains his reason for rewriting Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with an inquiry: “why is that woman rendered so horrific, when she is driven by love? That was my intervention” (“On Shakespeare” 167). Barker intends to compel the limitations of his audience’s imagination and make them reconsider the idea of eroticism in one of the most well-known, yet overlooked, stories of British literature—that of Gertrude and Claudius—with a specific emphasis on the female character. By taking up the silenced character of Gertrude in *Hamlet* and making her the new heroine of his play, Barker challenges the ethicist language of Shakespeare in light of the Elizabethan staging conventions as he says “[i]n shifting the focus to her fatal eroticism (a hypnotic regard which engulfs Claudius and wounds him grievously), I have set out to reinvigorate an ancient theme, annexed by Shakespeare from earlier texts, and turn it as he did to yet further extremes” (“Gertrude-The Cry” n.p.). In this text, Barker reconstructs Shakespeare’s characters that were bound by moral determinism in the form of individuals that choose to act with free will.

The dominant motifs of usurpation, adultery, murder, and revenge have rendered *Hamlet's* popularity vibrant. These topics are also observed in Barker's version; however, this time the focus is on Gertrude, a very unconventional woman that does not care about social rules or norms. Barker chooses *Hamlet* of all Shakespeare's plays which provides us with a depiction of a woman figure that is silenced and obedient. Feminist criticism has often held Shakespeare's works responsible for not treating female characters equally and/or as much as their male counterparts. It is not hard to observe that most female characters in his plays are represented in relation to a male figure whereas male characters are much more extensively represented and likewise they do not need to be considered with reference to a female character to be fully appreciated. When the representation of female characters is scrutinised, it is also seen that they are fashioned in a manner that requires them to follow the rules and decisions of their male counterparts around whom the plot is dominantly organised. Regarding the inequality of representation of different gender identities in Shakespeare's works, Hilda Smith aptly observes that "[w]omen were more concerned with virtue and with not appearing at odds with husbands or the wishes of male family members. Men were more concerned with their social standing and their egos to ensure they were not belittled or cuckolded by the women around them" (44). Accordingly, the representation of some female characters in Shakespeare's plays is problematic as in the case of Lady Macbeth and Gertrude, for instance, who are portrayed as bad wives and mothers, and in the case of Desdemona who is tested in terms of her sense of loyalty to her male counterpart. Moreover, some of his female characters are not given sufficient voice as we see in Ophelia, and at times they are removed from the plots of most notable works altogether such as the absent mother figures in *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Cymbeline*. Similarly, a critical reading of *Hamlet* would show that Gertrude is among the least-speaking characters in Shakespeare's play, and she is always criticised by her son Hamlet. She is far from acting upon her free will and is ruled by the male figures around her. When juxtaposed, Barker's play portrays a new context in which Gertrude, as the silenced character of the source text, is given a new characteristic that defies previous interpretations. Barker indicates that the reason for rewriting *Hamlet* is to offer an alternative identity for Gertrude and to alter her reputation as solely a guilty and weak woman. Problematising the patriarchal discourse of *Hamlet*, Barker centralises female sexuality, which he sees as a conceivably crucial and rather undermined topic in Shakespeare's text. Sexuality is already embedded in *Hamlet*; however, the representation of Hamlet's misogyny does not allow this underlying theme to be fully recognised. To subvert the conventional approach in representations and analyses of *Hamlet*, Barker sees this play as a vibrant source to explore sexual and gender issues.

Considering Barker's agenda in his theatrical works, *Hamlet* seems to be the most appropriate source play as it poses a moral problem. As Barker objects to didactic and moralist forms of tragedy, *Hamlet* is an appealing text for the playwright to construct another play about immorality. *Gertrude-The Cry* is quite subversive as it takes up the characters from Shakespeare's most renowned play

and places them in their own context by attributing different characteristics to them. In Barker's play, both obscene language and salacious scenes are employed to create an erotic effect different from the source text, which only impliedly mentions the issue of incest with the Ghost's warning: "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damned incest" (*Hamlet* 1.5.82-83) and Hamlet's ungrounded accusations such as "[s]he married. O most wicked speed! To post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (*Hamlet* 1.2.156-157). The source text's negative approach to sexuality is underlined in Barker's text where Gertrude does not allow others to judge her on basis of her hasty marriage and for engaging in an incestuous affair. In Barker's work, incest, the most condemned issue in Shakespeare's text, becomes the centre subject an example of which is portrayed in the beginning scene in which Gertrude and Claudius make love in front of King Hamlet's dying body. Barker's play opens with the murder scene in which Gertrude insists on killing her husband herself:

I should
Surely [...]
HE IS MY HUSBAND WHY NOT ME. (*Gertrude* 9)

This opening scene illustrates that Gertrude is utterly guilty of murder as well as incest and adultery. The fact that the couple has sex in this scene poses a challenge as such a scene could not have been imagined in early modern drama as Bruce R. Smith contends: "In the drama of early modern England such consummation is not even simulated directly: it happens offstage, out of hearing, out of sight" (128). Evidently, in this scene where murder, sex, lack of secrecy, adultery, and incest meet, not only the on-stage intercourse of Gertrude and Claudius but also the existence of a dead body in such a context render the subversive approach of this adaptation more manifest. All in all, Barker chooses *Hamlet* as a source text specifically because of the text's dominant themes like femininity, sexuality, and morality which he subverts altogether. To illustrate the problematic approach to these issues in the previous text, he rejects poor representation of a potentially powerful female character who does not let others rule her but overrules them all. *Hamlet* seems to be a proper choice as a source text as the play preaches morality which is denounced by Barker as he denies the centrality of moral issues both in his context and his text.

An Eroticised Mother and the Cry

Drawing attention to the fact that the male characters define the representation of the female characters in *Hamlet*, Rebecca Smith claims that male characters like the Ghost, Hamlet, and Claudius see and introduce Gertrude "as a sexual *object*" (207). This objectification undermines any function of Gertrude other than being an archetype of sexual infidelity, especially following Hamlet's harsh assaults directed toward her. Different from this representation, Barker reinterprets Gertrude as an eroticised woman who does not feel the slightest remorse after murdering her husband and marrying his brother. That is to say, this adaptation projects Gertrude as a character responsible for all unwarranted accusations set against her in Shakespeare's play except that she does not regret them, which means she defies the limitations of social norms. The traditional

characterisation of Gertrude in Shakespeare's version holds her responsible as much as Claudius for the murder of her husband, and the source text expects her to feel even more regretful than the actual villain. Barker, however, transforms this approach by making her equally responsible and yet not regret any of her deeds by denying the expectations of society and her son. The fact that she does not feel guilty is a seminal example that marks her difference from Shakespeare's Gertrude and makes Barker's interpretation a subversive one.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Claudius are mainly depicted as the murderous and sinful couple, which justifies Hamlet's anger and ambition to take revenge, and makes it solely *his* play. In Barker's version, however, Gertrude is the focal point and Hamlet is not unquestioningly held right. Barker believes that in Shakespeare's text, Gertrude is appraised according to moral criteria informed by the religious establishment of Elizabethan England: "Shakespeare's moral sense and his role in a Christian/Reformation society compelled him to routinely punish transgression with guilty feeling, and Gertrude's sketchily described character is soddened with shame and regret" ("Gertrude-The Cry" n.p.). This sheds light on Barker's specific emphasis on creating a female character that stubbornly devotes herself to transgressive sexuality. Barker depicts a contrary Gertrude who exemplifies an exceptional potency for lust and her sexual influence on nearly all of the characters of the play is quite evident. Her central role in the play is obvious considering that other characters are somehow depicted with their attitudes around her. For instance, she has two lovers, Claudius and Albert, who both admire her sexual potential. On the other hand, her son, Hamlet, and her mother-in-law, Isola, seem to hate her for the same reason. All characters admire her, judge her or talk about her. Even her servant Cascan's admiration of Gertrude's body is observed in the following words: "[E]very time your nakedness is so perfect hide it [...] keep it for the dark or these rare acts" (Barker, *Gertrude-The Cry* 10). Similarly, Isola is aware of her beauty and calls her legs "a dream" (10) even though she does not approve of her manners. The reactions of other characters illustrate the centrality of Gertrude's physicality which is never mentioned in the source text.

As Barker makes his criticism of Shakespeare explicit by interpreting his representation of Gertrude as censorious towards her sexuality, he makes a specific emphasis on her transgression of social and moral taboos. As an example, in this text, Gertrude is not afraid to assert her erotic side and exhibit her naked body. She is also depicted as an overly self-confident woman with daring and heretic remarks as she claims her nakedness as an expression of divine power in the question she poses to Claudius: "It is God my nakedness?" (61). Barker provides sexuality, more than any other feature, as a means to empower Gertrude rather than repeating a traditional representation of the character ruled by others. David Ian Rabey points to the impact of Gertrude's sexual power on other characters of the play as follows:

Gertrude's characteristic struggle and her mesmeric power are both erotic, frequently manifested in the play by her nakedness, beauty and

pain in/of searching, as physicalized through visual contact and the effect of the gaze – on her, and on those around her – as her energy transforms and unsettles the surrounding characters, particularly the men. (176)

Barker's presentation of sexuality as empowering the female character needs to be considered along with politics of sexuality. Kate Millett underlines the fact that sexual politics is constructed and defined by patriarchal politics: "Sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status. As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female" (26). Correspondingly, Gertrude in Shakespeare's work is conditioned by the interests of patriarchal politics. However, Barker confronts this type of politics by displaying her as an assertive woman who does not shape her sexuality upon the wishes of the male characters in the play. In his *Theatre of Catastrophe*, Barker uses strong female characters and attributes sexual and erotic aspects to them. Discussing Gertrude in comparison to other female characters in Barker's plays, Ruth Shade observes that "[m]any of his women are promiscuous, prostitutes or have bizarre sexual fetishes," which runs parallel with the claim that transgression is used by Barker as a way of attributing power to female characters (105). The first moment in the play that illustrates the difference between Shakespeare's Gertrude and Barker's version is when Gertrude's orgasmic cry mingles with King Hamlet's cry of pain during intercourse. Particularly in this surprising moment, it is initially noticed by the reader/audience that Barker's Gertrude is a cruel woman depicted differently from Shakespeare's character. Beginning from this scene, Gertrude's rebellious sexuality startles all the characters of the play, specifically Claudius, since, from this moment on, the ecstatic cry coming from Gertrude enslaves Claudius as he seeks the same cry throughout the rest of the play. Apparently, sexuality is reinforced with the sound of the orgasmic cry to highlight the power attributed to Gertrude in this play. It is through these transgressive acts can Gertrude assert herself against the male characters. Regarding the influence of Gertrude's cry on all characters in the play, Rabey states that "Claudius is haunted by it, addicted to it, seeks to provoke it and command it, though it can never be the same; Cascan listens out for it, Hamlet [...] seeks to police it, subdue it and extirpate it; but it proves uncontrollable" (173). Additionally, drawing on Rabey's comment "it occurs only at moments of betrayal and transgression" (176), Gertrude gives out this loud cry only at moments of guilt which seems to give her extreme pleasure. At first, she cries when she has intercourse with Claudius upon murdering her husband and second it is heard when she sees her son Hamlet dead upon her order. The cry, therefore, is associated with Gertrude's guilty nature and becomes a symbol of her transgressive power as she cries when she trespasses social and moral/religious norms. Therefore, her sexuality and the cry need to be taken as mediums through which she defies social norms.

Sean Carney mentions the significance of this cry by stating that it is the cry, "the object of the play's subtitle, which will go on to manifest itself as an inhuman and

disembodied force of desire, beyond the Queen's agency" (110). The cry outweighs Gertrude, for which reason Kilpatrick claims that "[a]s the king dies and the queen cries, her mad, ecstatic (orgasmic?) sob itself becomes the play's protagonist" (704). It is quite clear from the responses of other characters that the cry possibly surpasses the protagonist. The cry is especially influential on Claudius, who tries to objectify Gertrude for the sake of the cry itself: "The cry is more than the woman [...] The woman is the instrument/ But from the woman comes the cry" (33). Claudius's obsession for Gertrude is so great and dangerous that he heretically associates Gertrude's orgasmic cry with the death of god as he says to her:

I must have it [...]

The cry Gertrude

I must drag that cry from you again if it weighs fifty bells or

one thousand carcasses I must

IT KILLS GOD. (22)

As he expresses her influence on him, Claudius equates having sex with Gertrude to being in a religious war: "your body for all that it's revered by me is flesh and being flesh is ground ground trodden ground to which I'm bound a dirt poor labourer who tills and spills and fights and fails in his possession Gertrude it is God I'm fighting when I fight in you" (44). Claudius identifies the cry as a power that kills god, and he imagines he is fighting god while having sex with Gertrude. As it appears, Gertrude also assumes a godly position as she asks Claudius after sex: "How good am I? [...] How good I see your cock admires my performance" (18). Another example that demonstrates Gertrude's hold on Claudius is seen as he forgets the duties of a king when it comes to her:

The king governs the kingdom

Gertrude governs me

To him the armies and the acres

My whole life's in her belly in my opinion a superior estate. (67)

The sexual power Gertrude has been appointed objectifies Claudius, which is evident in the above quote illustrating his weak nature as he ignores the duties of a king when he is with Gertrude. Another instance that shows Gertrude's control over Claudius is when he feels apologetic toward her as she judges him for not cutting his nails and not washing his feet (29). These examples illustrate that Claudius acts like a servant to Gertrude, which is obviously in stark contrast with Shakespeare's text that depicts Gertrude as subject to Claudius. Claudius's attachment to the cry and his subsequent state of melancholy illustrate that he is cast in an inferior position to Gertrude as he is enslaved by her cry. Even though he wants to possess Gertrude with the words "Let him see what I have stolen/What was his/And what now belongs to me" (9), he becomes a servant of Gertrude's cry. In this regard, the cry not only signals her transgression of social and moral boundaries but also symbolises her sexual power over her male counterpart. In comparison to Shakespeare's Gertrude who does not talk much and even interprets the player queen's attitudes as "protest[ing] too much" (*Hamlet* 3.2.224), the "cry" she is given in the rewritten version alters the

perception of the character as a ruled object to a woman who makes her own decisions concerning sexuality.

Gertrude's eroticised nature is not only explicit in terms of her relation to Claudius. She also has an affair with a friend of Hamlet, the Duke of Mecklenburg, Albert who is mesmerised by Gertrude's body as he says, "I cannot describe the tension you keep me in [...] I am afraid to see what I so want to see" (58). Similar to Claudius, he is even ready to die for Gertrude as he begs "[b]e my death Gertrude" (59). It seems that Gertrude breaks social and moral norms once more by having a relationship with another man who admires her. The power of Gertrude's sexual nature over the other characters is once more underlined as this extremity arouses disgust in the male characters of the play towards her yet she does not act according to their judgements. Even after confronting all sorts of accusations, Gertrude is never ashamed, and she takes pride in knowing the art of sex and being so much desired by the two men. Her following exclamation is one of the most obvious examples of this:

I AM NOT ASHAMED
I SHALL NOT BE ASHAMED
WHEN DID I KNOW SHAME
NEVER
AND NEVER WILL KNOW IT (56)

Similar to the exposition of her naked body and bold language as transgressive acts, Gertrude goes against the notions of shame, decency, and propriety. Even though she is the source of rivalry and jealousy between two male characters, she does not yield to being possessed by any of them. This justifies that the play prioritises Gertrude's sexuality and her selfish attempt to satisfy only her pleasure. Ultimately, the representation of Gertrude in this play reflects Barker's opinions on the politics of sexuality: "Sexuality is the only thing that draws us completely out of ourselves and exposes the extreme, the will to conquer and submit on both sides of the partnership, the desire to conquer, own, possess, and simultaneously to surrender and be possessed" (qtd. in Rabey 14). Gertrude's effect on the male figures is a proper example of this as it is seen that she conquers the king and possesses Albert similarly. Even though it seems like Gertrude is the object of desire of the male characters, it is always up to her to decide whom she chooses, which shows that she is the one to subjugate them into her objects of desire. She is the decision-maker of these relationships, which illustrates that she has the power rather than the king or Albert.

Barker presents Gertrude in scenes of (im)moral extremity, which renders her an amorous, guilty, amoral woman, and this makes the play and the character even more challenging for the spectator. When Barker comments on his intentions to reiterate this character, his statement also reinforces this argument: "What I'm trying to do is to expose something that convention has made too solid. The conventional treatment of Gertrude, for instance, dismisses her as an oversexed bad mother. Something in me wanted to pose an alternative, to refocus, to put the light on different areas" ("On Shakespeare" 164). Instead of reiterating the traditional roles attributed to Gertrude as a wife and a mother,

he chooses to depict her as an independent woman who does not need to justify or feel guilty for any of her decisions and sexual experiences. By presenting the character in this light, Barker does not judge her, nor does he invite the audience to obtain such a critical approach. Rather, his version is a celebration of the woman's sexuality that helps us to ponder on the amount of judgement and oppression executed on her in the source play.

Hamlet, a Moralist

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet's characterisation as a moralist is seen as he reprimands the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius upon the comment of the ghost of his father who describes Gertrude as "a most seeming-virtuous Queen" (*Hamlet* 1.5.46). Hamlet's obsessive interest in his mother's sexuality commences following his encounter with the apparition of his father. In this regard, the two male figures of the play define the nature of sexuality of Gertrude as they obtain a censorious and a judgemental perspective towards her. This exemplifies Kate Millett's argument that "[t]he connection of woman, sex, and sin constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought" (54). Millett underlines that patriarchy sustains itself through sexual oppression. Regarding this view, Hamlet, both in the source text and in this adaptation, assumes a critical approach towards Gertrude and her sexuality, which is representative of the patriarchal thought defined by Millett. Different from Shakespeare's version, in Barker's play, Gertrude always confronts her son Prince Hamlet as quite an unconventional mother. In contrast to the highly erotic representation of Gertrude, Hamlet is a moralist, and like Shakespeare's Hamlet, he cannot abstain from blaming his mother. Comparable to the extremity of Gertrude's sexuality, Hamlet's persistence in the practice of social graces and ethical conduct is also excessive. Other characters' impressions of Hamlet also highlight this as his grandmother Isola calls him "a prig / And a prude/And a moralist" (24), and likewise, the servant Cascan describes Hamlet as a dangerous moralist (67).

Hamlet hates Gertrude's sexual manners, and he always criticises her clothes mainly because they do not make her look like a woman of her age. In an instance, knowing that Gertrude intentionally wears seductive dresses, he warns her about the length of her skirt: "The skirt's too short/However excellent your legs might be" (23). Although he impliedly expresses that it is inevitable not to be charmed by her legs, he wants her to behave like a mother. Similarly, he does not like the high-heeled shoes Gertrude wears when she gets naked after her labour, and he aggressively warns her to

REMOVE
THE
UNMATERNAL
CLUTTER
CLINGING
TO
YOUR
FEET. (75)

The control Hamlet would like to exert on his mother and Gertrude's ignorance of all these recalls MacKinnon's observation on female sexuality, which is "a force for freedom while being shackled and distorted and channelled in twisted directions by patriarchal controls" (xiv). Oppression of sexuality, which is what Hamlet tries to do throughout the play, is a form of patriarchal dominance. However, Gertrude's obstinacy poses a political response to male hegemony that cannot defeat her. Reminding the reader/spectator of Shakespeare's Hamlet, throughout Barker's play, Hamlet voices seriously misogynist remarks such as "WOMEN ARE SO COARSE" (13), and he tries to keep Gertrude under control with the words "Your skirt and your sex/EMBARRASS ME" (24). Gertrude's erotic nature causes Hamlet to hate the concept of love altogether. He does not believe in love as he voices: "I hate it all manifestations of the thing called love fill me with horror and contempt" (55). In this play, Hamlet's problem with his mother's sexuality is more in the foreground than in the source text. This time, he not only criticises his mother but also abhors her sexual nature. An apt example of this is observed as Hamlet voices the following words as he hears Gertrude's cry during her labour:

The woman I decline to employ a word like mother biologically correct though it might be the woman [...] [i]s 43 and by the laws of nature if nature were not so contaminated with disease should have shed her last egg whole easters and christmas ago [...] and [...] should be seated in a rocking chair with black blankets spread across her knees. (64-65)

Gertrude portrays an extremely opposite example of Hamlet's ideal vision of proper motherhood. For that reason, Hamlet considers her a sinful, unashamed woman, and never a proper parent. This idea is also manifested as Hamlet is told that his newborn sister has smiled upon her birth and he responds: "[W]ho would not smile to have escaped the fetid dungeon of my mother's womb" (65). In line with the claim that Howard Barker aims his drama to be "about rapturing of tolerances" (Barker, "Interview" 210), Hamlet is unable to tolerate his mother's lack of meeting social and moral demands. However, Hamlet's judgemental approach does not seem to suffice to control Gertrude. He cannot stop her from engaging in further sexual relationships, hence he fails to make her conform to his ideal portrait of motherhood.

Similar to Hamlet, his grandmother Isola does not approve of Gertrude's sexual manners either. Due to Gertrude's openly expressed erotic nature, Isola even hates the word sex: "I hate the word sex I really do I hate the word I tried to shut it out of my vocabulary but frankly it's impossible" (23). The reason for her disgust with sex is, similar to that of Hamlet, Gertrude's dissolute expression of her sexuality in front of all others. It is observed that just like Hamlet, Isola hates Gertrude's excessive sexuality and claims she has never seen "a darker and more vicious face it's like a wolf's it's like a bat's" (35). Isola and Hamlet are similar in the sense that they try to control and judge Gertrude throughout the play. However, despite Isola and Hamlet's warnings, "Gertrude is [...] mutinously unmaternal and persists in her spectacular eroticism" as Rabey claims (277). She is always assertive towards Hamlet unlike the Gertrude of Shakespeare's

play, and she even goes to the extreme of remaining naked in front of her son to prove her rebellious nature. Similar to her cry that enslaves other characters, she also uses her naked body to startle others, primarily Hamlet, and defies their norms.

To provide another note on the politics of sexuality, at the end of the play, Gertrude overcomes Hamlet as Gertrude manipulates murdering Hamlet by making him drink from the poisoned cup. This moment means the triumph of sensuality over morality. It turns out that if she had not killed Hamlet, Hamlet would kill Gertrude as he was planning her execution (85). This is a triumph for Gertrude as she gives out the cry of ecstasy a second time as a sign of transgressive power against her disciplinary son. His murder and Gertrude's survival mean the assertion of sexuality over morality. Contrary to the importance attached to morality and repentance in the former play, Barker's play defends impenitent characters against regularity, which marks his departure point from Shakespeare's version. His *Theatre of Catastrophe* rejects the moral message Shakespeare's work attempts to provide with the representation of characters that are more inclined to retribution. This adaptation illustrates that Barker disagrees with the moralist function of *Hamlet* and transforms the source text to such an extent to scrutinise fixed value systems by rejecting the more traditional moralistic interpretations and productions of the play.

Morality as a Norm

Concerning literary adaptations and their relation to the context in which they are produced, Linda Hutcheon argues that "adaptation is always framed in a context" (142). The period, place, society, and culture which give rise to a production or a text all play an important role in a thorough analysis. In this regard, an adaptation should not only be read in relation to the source text but also to its context. By situating Barker's play in its context as a work written in 2002, it is possible to observe some of the topics handled in the play as responses to the socio-political background of the production. The play's first production corresponds with the New-Labour government with Tony Blair as the leading figure. It is known that this government, even though led by Labour politicians, gave importance to norms of family, community, parenthood, and patriarchal values, which are all denounced in Barker's play. An analysis of the play alongside the predominant issues of the context in which it was constructed illustrates that much of the criticism embedded in the text extends to British society's norms and policies that limit individual freedom.

Howard Barker sees Britain as an empiricist, moralist, and utilitarian state (Barker, "Death" 113). For that reason, he voices his concern for the current status of the country in a number of his writings. In this play, he also covertly criticises the country and the major party politics by portraying characters that go against the norms upheld by the establishment. In this period, the New Labour government introduced some acts and orders that limited the rights of the individual. A prominent change in the early 2000s regarding the protection of public welfare was the introduction of Asbos (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders)

under the legislation of The Crime and Disorder Act of 1998. These orders along with other acts such as the subsequent Sexual Offences Acts of 2000 and 2003 were enacted by the New Labour government to ensure public safety and to subdue individuals with an ‘extreme’ sense of freedom that disrupt the rights of others. Representing both moralist and transgressive characters in his play, specifically with the juxtaposition of Hamlet and Gertrude, Barker reminds the reader/audience of these norms that are found to be excessively limiting individual liberty. To assert the power of individual liberty over limiting norms, recalling, in Graham Saunders’s words, “the erotic potential to disrupt order” (150), Barker uses Gertrude’s sexuality as an anarchic attack on social regulations. In the play, Hamlet’s emphasis on morality and conformism resembles the importance attached to the practice of social morality during the New Labour years. Although British politics was largely ruled by the left-wing between 1997 and 2010, it is widely considered that the practices of the Labour Party did not correspond to the expectations of the liberals and socialists in the country. Tony Blair, as the then prime minister, might have intended to keep his party aloof from both the Old Labour policies and the conservative notions of Thatcherism. However, it is largely observed that the New Labour was “heavily influenced – as no other Labour leadership in British history – by Christianity” (Coote 129), which meant that the party had strong tendencies toward conservative ideology. This is also evident in most of the statements of the party leaders concerning the regulations passed during the New Labour government as there was much emphasis on conventional family structure, patriarchal values, and the need to moderate dissenting individuals. An example is illustrated in Tony Blair’s following remark: “Social democratic thought was always the application of morality to political philosophy. One of the basic insights of the left, one of its distinguishing features, is to caution against too excessive an individualism” (“Our Citizens” n.p.). Although New Labour was expected to draw a profile markedly different from both Thatcherism and Old Labour politics, their emphasis on norms of family and traditional gender roles lead to questioning New Labour’s approach to liberalism. To discuss Barker’s rewriting of Shakespeare in this framework, the state’s preoccupation with moral standards for society is manifested in the play with Hamlet’s obsession to control any act of indecency. This correlation between the text and the context illustrates that Barker does not only alter Shakespeare’s text to a great extent but he also voices his disillusionment with the establishment by depicting characters that represent both sides of the larger social conflict.

Other ideas like family and parenthood are also used in Barker’s play to question and challenge the normative establishment. Newman informs that in the 2000s, “many of the government’s policies harked back to images of family and parenting based on traditional gender roles as the source of moral order” (3), which is yet another example that shows the close ties between New Labour’s agenda and conservative politics. It is also known that New Labour placed great emphasis on the concepts of family and parentage as it is “evidenced by efforts to make divorce more difficult and strong endorsement of the family as ‘society’s most important unit’” (Coote 129). Challenging this dominant notion of the day,

Barker dismisses this idea by portraying Gertrude and Claudius as completely irresponsible parents and by eroding the traditional set roles within the family. Possibly, the most striking example in the play that subverts the norms of parenthood is the moment when Claudius drinks Gertrude's milk while the newborn infant cries. Following the birth, Gertrude rejects her duty to feed the baby as a mother: "I MUTINY/Drink me Claudius/Let my daughter queue" (68). Symbolic of their lack of attention as parents, they leave the baby unnamed, and the child is taken away from them, which is also symbolic of the state's control over uncared children. The practice of detaching the baby from the parents for its good brings New Labour's Asbos to mind as they also included parenting programs that helped to control whether it was suitable for children to grow up in certain families or not. In light of the dominant politics of the day that uphold family unity as an important value and the roles of wife and husband as paramount, Barker's work stands out as highly subversive of such precepts. Other examples that go against the norms of the family are seen in scenes where Claudius smothers his mother, and Isola and Ragusa drown the infant. It should be noted that Barker does not portray such scenes to give a didactic message to the audience/reader. Instead, he positions these ideas in opposition to the dominant New Labour Socialism that is not genuinely grounded in individual liberty. In this respect, Barker's dissolution of proper family structure poses a response to the notion of collective conformism that characterised the period.

Barker's representation of nudity and sexuality on the stage also needs to be taken as a manifestation of the power of individual liberty against state control: "The body is a symbol of liberty, of disorder. Free sexuality, the liberty of desire is a threat to political power, to the order of the state. The human body is the object of all political power. It is the control of each body that is the object of the state" (qtd. in Obis 2013, 74). Barker's views on the power of the body, nakedness, and overt sexuality reflect the importance he attaches to Gertrude and shows how his version is a challenge to that of Shakespeare as well as social norms. Gertrude's body is the object of political power not an object of male desire as is previously thought. Therefore, the representation of nakedness, which is itself a symbol of transgression, needs to be taken as a political act against patriarchal hegemony. By defending her right to express her sexuality and her body as she likes, Gertrude poses a challenge to the idea that the body of the individual needs to be controlled by the state.

Conclusion

Gertrude-The Cry is a highly subversive modern Shakespeare adaptation that transforms the motivations of the most important characters of the play and brings the previously silenced female character to the foreground. In her analysis of Barker's play, Lynne Bradley argues that in the process of adaptation, Barker "deconstructs Shakespeare until there is no Shakespeare left" (184). The play, *Gertrude-The Cry* puts Gertrude and Claudius as the characters that have been cast as guilty of murder in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the foreground and attributes eroticised identities to these characters and challenges society's

norms concerning such taboos. It is clear that the principal characters of this catastrophic play are driven by guilt, and they rebel against accepted moral values. Barker does not aim at a moral teaching or a didactic message through such an unapologetic work. Instead, the early-modern perception of a guilty woman represented in Shakespeare's plays is challenged and replaced by an extremely assertive and passionate contemporary female/feminine figure in Barker's adaptation.

Among the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, Howard Barker's *Gertrude-The Cry* is one of the most subversive examples. Barker mainly criticises the particular representation of the not-so central female figure of *Hamlet*. Along with this, his adaptation also poses a subverted version of the source text and its support of traditional values of morality and patriarchy that limit the freedom of the overlooked female character. Considering the transformations in Barker's adaptation, his work is mostly shaped by sexual and gender politics as it depicts both concerns in one character by reformulating Gertrude as an assertively sexual woman. Using the basic principles of his Theatre of Catastrophe in his Shakespearean adaptation, Barker subverts the cultural reception of the source text by startling his readers/audiences with a very different approach to a familiar story. The political aspect of Barker's transformations also resonates with the historical framework that surrounds his text. As the adaptation is created in the early 2000s, the criticism he poses in the play also extends to the problematic issues of this period, namely the moralistic discourse of the New Labour politics. All in all, by shifting the focus to the female character of the source text and by foregrounding the centrality of sexuality for her liberty, Barker's adaptation alludes to the specific British context during the New Labour government that is remembered for its preoccupation with social and moral values.

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