

## Cultural Anxiety and the Female Body in Zeffirelli's Hamlet

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**Xianfeng Mou,**

**"Cultural Anxiety and the Female Body in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*"**

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**Abstract:** Xianfeng Mou analyzes in her paper, "Cultural Anxiety and the Female Body in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*," the workings of power, both discursive and visual, behind Zeffirelli's handling of the Nunnery and Mousetrap scenes, focusing on feminist interpretations of the female body and female sexuality. Drawing on theories by Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva, Mou analyzes how Zeffirelli, using Hamlet as his spokesman, constructs his negative meanings about Gertrude's sexuality as rampant and aberrant and Ophelia's body as disloyal, insincere, and insignificant. Mou argues that Zeffirelli's discursive and visual constructions confer absolute power upon Hamlet and that this reflects Zeffirelli's intentions as well as society's desire for more power over the female body. That cultural desire, in turn, disguises male anxiety about the power of women in cultural production.

## Xianfeng MOU

### Cultural Anxiety and the Female Body in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*

When Franco Zeffirelli launched his shooting of *Hamlet* (released in 1990), he stated that he wanted to "present the play as Shakespeare 'meant' it to be performed" (Dawson 212). His invocation of Shakespeare's authority, together with his *auteur* interpretations and huge commercial success with two other Shakespeare plays, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, seemed to invest his filmic interpretation of *Hamlet* with tremendous authority. Many critics have thought that Zeffirelli "focus[ed] on *Hamlet* as a family romance [and] plac[ed] Gertrude firmly at its center" (Crowl 67), thereby greatly "enhanc[ing] Gertrude's importance" (Weller 122). However, some feminist critics, such as Carol Chillington Rutter, refute the claim of political correctness and argue that rather than enhance women, the film further degrades Gertrude by portraying her as "behaving like an adolescent only just discovering the 'heyday in the blood'" (Rutter 304). William van Waston seconds Rutter's view and reads the film as manifesting not so much an advancing of women's cause as "[Zeffirelli's] obsessive nostalgia for patriarchy which has led him into an increasingly reactionary position" (qtd. in Cartmell 217). These interpretations seem less aesthetic than ideologically at odds.

In this paper I explain why critical interpretations of Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* produce seemingly gendered interpretations of Gertrude and Ophelia. By analyzing the director's handling of the Nunnery and Mousetrap scenes in terms of the female body, I argue that compared to Shakespeare's original text, Zeffirelli's representations, although seemingly liberal, actually strip women of power. The result is that Zeffirelli grants more power to Hamlet, a cultural code for late twentieth-century North America, than the play warrants. Zeffirelli endows Hamlet with absolute power in the film to signal the increasing anxiety of contemporary culture over the progress of the women's movement and the increasing power of women in cultural production.

By analyzing the lines that the actors and actresses speak as well as Zeffirelli's visual narratives in the two scenes, I crystallize the process that Zeffirelli constructs his meanings about the female body to make intelligible the film's hidden desire regarding women. I draw on Julia Kristeva's view that language reflects the desire of the subject: "*Desire* [is] where the subject is implicated (body and history), and *symbolic order*, reason, intelligibility. Critical knowledge ties and unties their imbrications" (Kristeva 116). Since literature and art give rise to applications of ideological doctrines (Kristeva 95), it follows that Zeffirelli's film reflects the cultural beliefs of contemporary North America. At the same time, Kristeva argues that interpretations of literature and art such as mine are necessarily varied and open: "an always infinite discourse, an always open enunciation of a search.... The *objective* of this search is to make *manifest* the very *procedure* through which this 'science,' its 'object' and their relationship are brought about" (95; emphases in the original). My purpose, then, is to reveal the procedures by which the film represents and constructs meanings about the female body.

The theories on discourse and power of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault are useful guides as we go beyond the mere recognition that Zeffirelli's film degrades Gertrude, Rutter's thesis, and seek to find the workings of power that produce the feminist illusion. Foucault's theory of the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure further exposes the specific workings of power between Hamlet and Gertrude as well as those between Hamlet and Ophelia. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault proposes that the discourse on human sexuality is sustained by the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure (11). The four principal features of the regime are particularly relevant to our discussion: the negative relation, the insistence of the rule, the logic of censorship, and the uniformity of the apparatus. According to Foucault, any connection between power and sex is established in negative relationships. That is, where sex and pleasure are concerned, power always says no. Second, the legitimacy of sex is to be deciphered on the basis of its relation to the law laid down by power through language. Third, power censors sex in a logical sequence: sex is not permitted; it cannot be said; its existence is denied. Fourth, the apparatus of power is characterized by uniformity. In other words, power is exercised over sex at all levels (see Foucault 83-84).

Butler refines Foucault's thought by arguing that that power is discursively constructed through the creation of sexual norms and the repeated citation of those norms (10). The subject who creates and cites the norms to discipline the object simultaneously establishes "an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I'" (Butler 15). In other words, the subject does not enjoy an anterior power. It is rather through a process of creation and reiteration of norms that he simultaneously invokes and constructs power for himself. Therefore, the negative meanings the two key women bear in the film -- that Gertrude's sexuality is rampant and aberrant and that Ophelia is disloyal, insincere, and insignificant -- are constructed discursively by Hamlet through the lines that he speaks. In creating the norms that demean the two women, Hamlet simultaneously constructs himself as virtuous and invests himself with power over Gertrude and Ophelia.

In addition to these theories of discourse, we need to remember that films are not so much linguistic exercises as visual narratives. Besides analyzing Zeffirelli's discursive construction of power through each character's scripts, we must also draw attention to power communicated through the visual narratives created by camera placement, such as camera angles, the screen positions of characters, and above all Zeffirelli's masculine cinematic gaze. Zeffirelli employs a variety of visual techniques to invest Hamlet with predominant power as the active doer and gazer. At the same time, the film's superficial visual enhancement of Gertrude paradoxically, along with the textually sanctioned degradation of Ophelia, meets the cultural need of subjecting women to further control. Degradation camouflaged as enhancement, however, is where the film does its greatest harm.

The film's displays of verbal and physical violence first attract me to the topic, but Zeffirelli's subtle choice of where to place Hamlet's "get thee to a nunnery" speech strikes me as one of his most telling editorial comments. Under Zeffirelli's direction, Hamlet delivers the lines to Ophelia not in the traditional Nunnery scene, but in the Mousetrap scene ("Get thee [to] a nunn'ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? ... Believe none of us" (3.1.120-28). Zeffirelli's move has invited a wealth of interpretations. Crowl thinks that the shift makes "'The Mousetrap' ... less about Hamlet's power struggle with Claudius than about the conclusion of his relationship with Ophelia and the preparation for his confrontation with Gertrude" (59-61). Rutter disagrees with him. She believes that most of the Shakespeare audience know of the Nunnery speech, so its verbal violence already exists in their minds. The speech's absence in the film's Nunnery scene and unexpected appearance in the Mousetrap scene actually abuse Ophelia twice (306). They are both right and wrong. Crowl is right because the director is concerned with concluding Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia. Rutter is right because Zeffirelli's displacement carries the verbal violence over to the Mousetrap scene. But they both fail to see through Zeffirelli's strategic move to his primary motive of defining Ophelia as insignificant.

Does Ophelia's body matter? The answer becomes evident when we connect the verbal violence of the Nunnery speech to the physical violence with which Hamlet treats Ophelia in this particular scene. Compared to the play, these instances of physical violence betray Zeffirelli's added efforts to subjugate Ophelia. Such excessive physical violence lacks ground because of the film's macro-context as a family romance between Gertrude and Hamlet and the scene's micro-context of Hamlet's awareness of the spies at the beginning of the scene where he has spotted Polonius and Claudius hiding up (see Crowl 59). These two contexts lead to two conclusions: First, in the film, Hamlet does not love Ophelia, which differs from the situation of the play; second, in the film, he knows the spies are there, which he cannot be certain in the play. In fact, Zeffirelli has often been quoted as declaring that Hamlet does not love Ophelia (Haggood 90). It follows that Zeffirelli should not make Hamlet act deeply hurt when Hamlet gets Ophelia's evasive answer "At home, my lord" to his question "Where is your father?" (3.1.129-30). From then on, Hamlet berates Ophelia, pinches her chin, thrusts her against the stone wall, and hurls the "remembrance" to the ground in front of her feet (3.1.142-49). The violence of his vituperation connects with the violence of the Nunnery speech Zeffirelli moves to the Mousetrap scene. Hamlet's ungrounded violence indicates Zeffirelli's hidden message that Ophelia does not matter.

Hamlet's cruelty further intensifies Ophelia's pain and marks her as unimportant when we consider that Zeffirelli insists that Ophelia loves Hamlet while never establishing any reciprocation on Hamlet's part. When Hamlet denies he has given her any remembrance, Ophelia objects: "My honor'd lord, you know right well you did / And with them words of so sweet breath compos'd / As made them more rich" (3.1.96-98). Through her passionate tone, the sympathetic audience can almost feel her heart quivering. When Hamlet goes on to say, "I did love you once," the deep hurt in her tremulous reply -- "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so" --



makes her pain almost tangible (3.1.114-15). In the Mousetrap scene, Hamlet continues to poke at her wounds by insulting her with his bantering about "country matters." This scene features a public environment for entertainment. That Zeffirelli instructs Hamlet to deliver the Nunnery speech under such a context suggests that his Hamlet trivializes Ophelia and her love (see picture, Hamlet pinches Ophelia's chin). After confirming Claudius as the guilty murderer, Hamlet gives Ophelia a final, violent, and aggressive kiss. Then he finishes her off with a flippant "farewell," marking the end of his utilization and completing the violent circle. Rather than change and invent new lines, as he will do to demean Gertrude, Zeffirelli only changes the tones in which Hamlet and Ophelia deliver their lines to convey his subtle condemnation of her.

Besides rearranging the order of speeches to demean Ophelia, Zeffirelli draws on the language of the play to establish negative meanings for Ophelia and endow Hamlet with exclusive power of discourse. Hamlet defines Ophelia as unchaste, disloyal, and insincere. He finds faults with her physical beauty -- "That if you be honest and fair, [your honesty] should admit no discourse to your beauty" -- and accuses her of being unchaste; his main purpose, however, is to paint her as disloyal and insincere -- "I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice... God hath given you one face, and you make yourself another..." (3.1.102, 104, 106-07, 134-39, 142-49). Zeffirelli retains most of the key lines for Hamlet in the Nunnery scene but heavily cuts Ophelia's. At the crucial moment when Hamlet berates her, Zeffirelli makes Ophelia totally speechless to give Hamlet absolute discursive power. Regarding her answer "At home, my lord," Zeffirelli aligns his camera angle with Hamlet's male point of view. By making Hamlet aware of the presence of the spies, Zeffirelli leaves Ophelia no way out. She must choose either complete silence and loyalty to her father and the king, which she does, or loyalty to Hamlet, although he hardly earns her trust at this point. No matter what she chooses, she will be condemned.

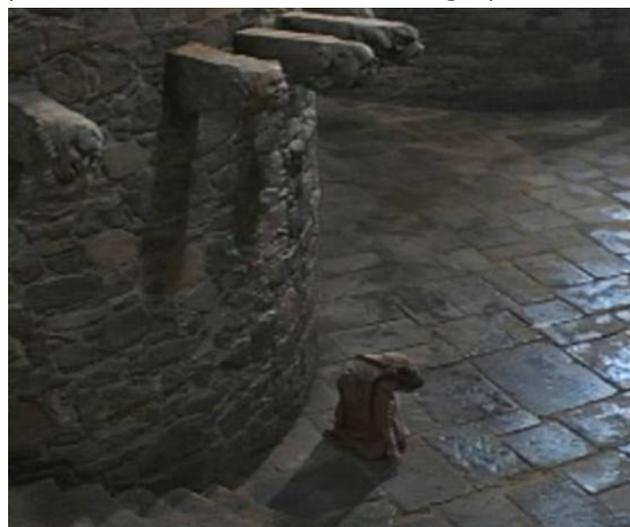
Zeffirelli does give Ophelia a nominal nod for her resistance in the Mousetrap scene. Though despondent in love, she is still defiant at the beginning of the scene. When Hamlet stings her, "Do you think I meant country matters?" she emphatically retorts: "I think of nothing, my lord" (3.2.116-17). Her stress of "I" instead of "nothing" shows her subtle assertiveness. When Hamlet accuses Gertrude of a hasty remarriage, Ophelia cannot but correct him, "Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord" (3.2.128). That insistence shows her courage and sympathy for Gertrude. Ophelia does not possess much discursive power to construct her selfhood, and the tremendous power of Hamlet's construction quickly washes away her subtle assertiveness and courage. Nonetheless, she still has her physical body. She resists with her face (see an example of this in the picture ) Zeffirelli's



sympathy for allowing that to happen may be misleading because he has repeatedly designated her as unimportant. He permits Ophelia only a very limited degree of agency. He turns her looks of rebellion gradually to those of confusion until finally she snaps. Besides a show of resistance, her looks simultaneously attest to her status of being written. In a way, Zeffirelli appropriates Ophelia's agency of resistance because he finally negates it in her madness.

In addition to his strategy of physical violence, discursive construction, and appropriation of Ophelia's resistance, Zeffirelli also employs such visual methods as costume and camera placement to prevent her from gaining symbolic and physical position. According to Rutter, the way Zeffirelli dresses Ophelia -- the white embroidered cap, the dull, shapeless dresses, and her long, dark plaits -- make her resemble a child, although Rutter believes that Ophelia's childlike face often registers the thoughts, emotions, and rebellion of a mature woman (304). But a child is not a fully developed human being. Compared to Gertrude's attractive dresses, Ophelia's shapeless dresses hide her and make her invisible. Zeffirelli's infantilizing strategies hinder Ophelia from reaching the autonomy of adulthood. His treatment reflects society's secret desire to reduce the intelligent Ophelia to a helpless figure who needs to be controlled.

Ophelia is most disadvantaged by Zeffirelli's camera placement, which narrates the film from Hamlet's perspective. Besides spectator looks, he initiates almost all the shots from Hamlet's angle, looking at Ophelia. When the Nunnery scene begins, Zeffirelli lets Hamlet spot, from a high position, Polonius and Claudius using Ophelia to trap him. So Ophelia suffers from both objectification and moral degradation. She seldom possesses empowering point-of-view shots.



Zeffirelli usually positions her at the lower part of the screen in long, high-angle shots in the Nunnery scene, or objectifies her in uncomfortable close-ups featuring her tortured face. Zeffirelli also diminishes her by the way he places her before Hamlet or against oppressive backgrounds like the massive watchtower in the Nunnery scene. The watchtower, together with Zeffirelli's high angle shots from Hamlet's point of view, reduces her to a tiny figure when Hamlet hurls his "remembrance" to the ground in front of her feet. These techniques disempower her and transform her into a powerless object passively receiving the gaze. She is constantly looked at; she does not see.

By contrast, Gertrude seems to occupy the visual center of Zeffirelli's film, something that many male critics have relished and praised. But what is problematic about Gertrude, both in the play and the film, is her sexuality. Indeed, Gertrude's maternal sexuality seems to occupy the center of Hamlet's consciousness. Janet Adelman holds that Gertrude's centrality in the play hinges on her maternal sexuality. Hamlet's obsessive fantasy regarding Gertrude's sexuality reflects his infantile fear and desire as well as the play's pervasive boundary panic (Adelman 12-19). Her centrality is not due only to Hamlet's infantile fear or desire but also to the patriarchal culture's disciplinary power over all female sexuality, which is implied in Hamlet's strategy of dealing with his mother -- desexualizing Gertrude's maternal body through recreating a bodiless father (Adelman 18). This last point is problematic, since the film's recreation of a bodiless father plants the father's body, not Gertrude's body, firmly at its ideological center. Adelman's ideas, though valid, are not sufficient to analyze the film. In fact, the film demonstrates that men exercise tremendous power over Gertrude's sexuality on three levels: Hamlet's construction and citation of sexual norms for her, his strategy of desexualizing her, and the cinematic male maze reducing her to a passive, desired object.

Judith Butler's theory of discursive construction and "the law of sex" help us understand how Gertrude's sexuality constructs Hamlet's moral power and authority over her. Butler takes sex as a

symbol for social commandment and believes that the subject creates compulsory sexual norms to govern the object and elevates the subjectively constructed norms as objective laws and ideals through repeated citation of the norms: "If 'sex' [a symbolic function understood as a kind of commandment or injunction] is assumed in the same way that a law is cited ... then 'the law of sex' is repeatedly fortified and idealized only to the extent that it is reiterated as the law, produced as the law, the anterior and inapproximable ideal, by the very citations it is said to command" (14). During the process of construction and citation, the subject simultaneously constructs his self and power (see Butler 9, 15). In other words, the subject does not enjoy an anterior existence or disciplinary power prior to his construction and citation. Our detailed analyses of the process in the following paragraphs show that Zeffirelli makes Hamlet, the spokesman, establish his moral power over Gertrude in the Mousetrap scene through repeated discursive construction and reiteration of the sexual norms for Gertrude.

Hamlet's process of signifying Gertrude is complex. In the Mousetrap scene, after he stops insulting Ophelia, he shifts his focus to his mother, publicly accusing her: "Look how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours" (3.2.126-27). The norm he implies is that Gertrude should not have forgotten the sorrow of her husband's death and remarried so soon. After Ophelia comments, Hamlet confirms the norm yet again: "O heavens, died two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year" (3.2.130-32), lines that Zeffirelli takes directly from the play. The third time Hamlet berates Gertrude occurs at the end of the play-within-a-play's prologue. The line -- "'Tis brief, my lord" -- is directed at Ophelia in the play (3.2.153), but Zeffirelli purposefully changes it to "'Tis brief, my son" and forces it onto Gertrude to give Hamlet another chance to sting her. Her alleged crime is her transient love for Hamlet Senior. The fourth time Hamlet insists on a norm for Gertrude occurs in the lines he has added to the dialogue of the Player King and the Player Queen: "If once a widow, ever I be wife," which suggests that Gertrude should have remained a widow forever (3.2.223). Besides shortening and transposing lines, Zeffirelli invented a new line for the Player King, who says, in the film: "Should I die before a new sun shine / You might another husband soon entwine." The ugly image of entwining, which strongly hints at adultery, reinforces Hamlet's disgust at Gertrude's sexuality and the way he accuses her of misbehaving. The fifth time Hamlet reiterates his position, he addresses Gertrude directly to ensure she gets the message -- "Madame, how like you this play?" (3.2.229) -- giving Gertrude her only chance in Zeffirelli's scene to defend herself. Her answer, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," stresses "protest" (3.2.230), not "too much," as if to say, in Zeffirelli's construction, that she believes the lady in the play-within-a-play should not have spoken prematurely, that she should in fact be allowed to seek new happiness. This answer no doubt does not satisfy Hamlet, so he stings her, for the sixth time, by comparing the Player Queen to the shameful Gertrude -- "O but *she*!! keep her word" (3.2.231; my emphasis). Hamlet's irony is meant to remind Gertrude that she has breached a social norm.

Through his repeated discursive performances (six times in this scene alone), Hamlet, under Zeffirelli's direction, constructs and reiterates constricting norms of widowhood for Gertrude. But neither the play nor the film has ever indicated these norms exist. What the audience have is purely Hamlet's words, his own construction. In light of Butler's "law of sex," Hamlet carries out the construction and citation simultaneously. He derives his power from the very act of citing the norms which he himself produces. The norms of widowhood do not have a fixed form prior to his act of citation. That he cites them gives the audience the illusion that these norms possess factual existence prior to his citation. In other words, his citation endows his subjectively constructed norms with the objective status and power of obligatory laws -- "the anterior and inapproximable ideal" -- for Gertrude.

Furthermore, during the process of construction and citation, Hamlet not only constructs Gertrude as negative, but also constructs himself as positive. In other words, during the process he establishes "an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I'" (Butler 15). The audience gets to know him, and in this film at least, approve of him, because of the way he condemns his mother, presents himself as virtuous, and invests himself with the power to discipline. He is complicit with power from the very beginning, yet, it must be noted that "literature does not give

rise to specific knowledge, but to *applications* of doctrines that are nothing but ideological exercises" (Kristeva 95). As a result, whether the norms exist or not does not concern Hamlet or Zeffirelli. What they desire is the power associated with their illusionary factual existence. And the desire for that power reflects the ideological exercises of late twentieth-century North America. Compared to the play, Zeffirelli's added effort of transposing one line from Ophelia to Gertrude and inventing a new line for the Player King underlies his as well as society's heightened anxiety and wish for control over female sexuality.

Zeffirelli does not allow Gertrude to possess the linguistic power to build her own norms to counter Hamlet's definition. Compared to Hamlet's six attacks, Gertrude only has two brief chances to speak. Furthermore, one line, the one Zeffirelli transposes from Ophelia to Gertrude -- from "'Tis brief, my lord" in the play to "'Tis brief, my son" in the film -- does not grant Gertrude, but Hamlet, the power to mark. Zeffirelli's invented couplet for the Player King serves the same function: it intensifies Hamlet's control over female sexuality. Zeffirelli's Gertrude, despite many critics, is more dominated than Shakespeare's. Zeffirelli's cinematic gaze also subjugates Gertrude by rendering her as a passive, desired object. In any film, high angle shots diminish characters while low angle shots enhance them. Therefore characters occupying high screen positions enjoy more power. In terms of the cinematic gaze, the initiator of the gaze possesses power while the gazed at does not. Close-up shots increase the intensity of the gaze, thereby reducing the power of the object. A film employs three looks, therefore, that differentiate characters in terms of power: "The look of the camera (at the profilmic), the look of the spectator (at the film projected on the screen), and the intradiegetic look of each character within the film (at other characters, objects, etc.) intersect, join, and relay one another in a complex system which structures vision and meaning and defines ... the 'visible things of cinema'" (Lauretis 86-87).

Gertrude does not possess much power in either the Nunnery or the Mousetrap scene. At the beginning of the Nunnery scene, she only appears briefly, although she has a few point-of-view shots as she watches Ophelia and Polonius. In the Mousetrap scene, Zeffirelli makes the camera, aligned with Hamlet's point of view, constantly look at Gertrude to signify his control of her. Regarding screen position, Zeffirelli usually places her in upper or middle sections of the screen, thereby allowing her some degree of power. In the Mousetrap scene, Zeffirelli also features her in comfortable medium shots. Zeffirelli's techniques would convince the audience that he is enhancing Gertrude's importance. Indeed, that is the interpretation many male critics have picked up. But his real intention is to highlight Gertrude's attractiveness. For example, at the beginning of the Nunnery scene, he highlights her "girlishness," when Claudius touches her face -- as an adult would touch a child-- (see picture). In the Mousetrap scene, Zeffirelli again emphasizes Gertrude's childlike appeal when the camera catches her happily clapping her hands when the play-within-a-play starts. These shots show that Gertrude's status is further reduced because Zeffirelli films her from the point of view of a male spectator, stressing her desirability. Compared to the way he films Ophelia, Zeffirelli's engagement with Gertrude is much simpler. Compared to his disguised degradation of Gertrude, his signification of Ophelia as disloyal, unimportant, underdeveloped, and completely powerless is much overt. His strategies mainly include displays of verbal and physical violence, discursive construction, appropriation of Ophelia's resistance, visual methods of infantilizing Ophelia, and camera placement. But they reflect the same cultural anxiety and desire for more control over the female body as the scenes that feature Gertrude.



My analysis of Zeffirelli's treatment of the Nunnery and Mousetrap scenes from the female body -- its sexuality and physical body -- locate power in the dynamics of discursive performances and the visual narratives of the film. In each case, Zeffirelli invests Hamlet -- his spokesman and rep-

representative of the patriarchal society -- with predominant power from multiple levels. Under his direction, Hamlet always negates Gertrude and Ophelia. Zeffirelli's creation of Hamlet as the consummate prince commanding absolute power and authority over the women reflects society's anxiety over women's ascending power in representation. Zeffirelli's approach kills three birds with one stone -- "supplying a necessary aura of novelty and contemporaneity, adapting to new pressure, while at the same time bringing them under control" (Gledhill 172). With his pro-feminist colors, Zeffirelli not only provides the film industry with a sense of novelty, but also adjusts the industry to pressures from the women's movement. In absorbing and diffusing the pressure this way, he further consolidates the patriarchal society. That is exactly the danger of Gertrude's increased centrality and Ophelia's overtly intelligent performances that characterize Zeffirelli's film. I believe that to expose and counterattack such a strategy, women everywhere need to wield the power of representation to resist and question any discourse of dominance.

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