

Evidence that the men in the play have power over the women in the play:

- * Act I, scene ii, line 145, 151
- * Act I, scene ii, line 146
- * Act I, scene iii, line 33
- * Act I, scene iii, line 85
- * Act I, scene iii, line 104
- * Act I, scene iii, line 136
- * Act II, scene ii, line 33
- * Act II, scene I, line 85
- * Act II, scene ii, lines 108-109
- * Act III, scene I, line 29
- * Act III, scene I, line 37
- * Act III, scene ii, lines 111-112
- * Act III, scene ii, lines 172-174
- * Act III, scene iv, lines 1-2
- * Act III, scene iv, lines 18-19
- * Act III, scene iv, line 182
- * Act III, scene v, line 75
- * Act III, scene v, line 85
- * Act III, scene v, lines 159-160
- * Act IV, scene v, line 123
- * Act IV, scene v, line 129

It is quite obvious, evidenced by the presence of the lines listed above, that the men in William Shakespeare's play, Hamlet have power over the women in the play. From the very beginning of the play, one notices that Hamlet is heavily dominated by male characters, as there are only two women in the entire play- Gertrude and Ophelia. All of the text that has been collected to support the preliminary thesis deals directly with these two women. The fact that there are only two females in the play only adds to the weakness and domination by the males of the female sex. Throughout the play, both women are told what to do, yelled at, and play a very small part in the decision-making process. This is first evidenced by Queen Gertrude in Act I, scene ii, lines 145 and 151. Hamlet is upset that "within a month" of his father's death, the Queen hastily "married with [Hamlet's] uncle." Queen Gertrude cannot stand to be by herself for even two months after her husband passes away, a sign of weakness and dependence. Her son Hamlet cries out in frustration "frailty, thy name is woman (I, ii, 46)." This one sentence can be used to summarize the role of women in the play. Gertrude cannot spare any time to grieve over her late husband, for she must find another man to depend on, who turns out to be her husband's brother, Claudius. Although Gertrude is a queen, and a woman of high status and power, she is not treated so. Polonius, King Claudius's counselor, does not talk to the Queen with the respect that he should. He is not royalty, as she is, but nevertheless orders Gertrude to "look you lay home to him [and] tell him his pranks have been to broad to bear with (III, iv, 1-2)." Polonius is telling the Queen how to approach and talk to her own son, illustrating that although she is royalty, she is also a woman, and that is how

Polonius regards her. Gertrude's son, Hamlet, also feels that he has power over her, as he sometimes blatantly disregards her requests and feelings. When the two of them are alone, having a mother-to-son chat, Hamlet tells his mother, in Act III, scene iv, lines 18-19, to "come, come and sit you down [and] you shall not budge." In this instance, Hamlet uses his gender to override the honor with which he should regard his mother, the Queen of Denmark. Besides being treated submissively by the men in the play, Gertrude exhibits ignorance and a lack of independence, making her more susceptible to the men's demands. In Act II, scene ii, the King and Queen are welcoming their Guests, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After the King says "Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern (line 32), the Queen remarks, "Thanks Guildenstern and Gentle Rosencrantz," in line 33. If she had a mind of her own, she could have come up with something more original to say, but she merely mimics what her husband has just said. She exhibits indecisiveness again in Act III, scene iv, line 182, in which she is talking to Hamlet and asks him "What shall [she] do?" Once again, she is a queen- a symbol of royalty and power. A strong, independent queen does not need help from her son. However, the time does come when she steps up to her correct level and attempts to protect her husband from Laertes' violent temperament and actions. Gertrude holds Leartes back in lines 126 and 129 of Act IV, scene v, but Claudius tells her to "Let him go (126)," and "Let him demand his fill (129)." Claudius seems threatened by this exhibition of his wife's power, and quickly tells her to stop it. As expected, Gertrude obeys and backs off. Claudius has given Gertrude demands before, in scene I of Act III, to which Gertrude replies "I shall obey (III, I, 37)." Simply the word "obey" exemplifies the husband-dominant relationship that she is in with Claudius. Queen Gertrude is never truly given the respect that she deserves as royalty because she is a woman, and that is what the men in the play see her as. Ophelia, the other woman in Hamlet is treated in the same way, as a dainty flower who would not blink unless told to do so. Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, and Laertes's sister, exhibits extreme dependence on men and submissiveness throughout the play. Like Queen Gertrude, Ophelia tends to accept the demands of the men without question. In her first conversation with her father and brother in Act I, scene iii, they are advising her to reject the callings of Prince Hamlet. The instructions that Laertes has given Ophelia are in her "memory locked, and [he] shall keep the key of it (I, iii, 85). Ophelia (literally) gives her brother the ability to make decisions for her, the key to her thoughts. Time after time, Ophelia displays pure ignorance and indecisiveness. She tells Polonius in the same scene, line 104, that she does not know "what [she] should think." If a woman is constantly telling the men in her life that she does not know what to think, than they will tell her what to think. Polonius states that he will "teach" Ophelia what to think in line 105. In the very same instance, he tells her to think herself "a baby," in infantile creature that barely knows how to crawl. The power that Polonius has over Ophelia in this scene is enormous and infinite. Ophelia, almost embracing the demands, tells her father that she "shall obey (line 136)." Polonius is Ophelia's confidante, her friend, with whom she even shares her love life. Despite the possibility that she may have strong interests in Hamlet, she obeys Polonius' command to "repel his letters," and then "denied his access" to

her in Act II, scene ii, lines 108-109. Everything that happens in this young woman's life is controlled by her father, and it seems not to bother Ophelia until she loses this controller of her life. After having proclaimed his love to her, and then rejected her, Prince Hamlet kills Polonius later in the play. Ophelia is now left alone, her brother gone out of the country, rejected by Hamlet, and now, by the death of her father. Due to the fact that Ophelia cannot live without a man in her life, she goes crazy. Claudius is aware of this, as he states that Ophelia's insanity "springs all from her father's death (III, v, 75)." Gertrude, the other female in the play, does not lose her sanity after her husband's death because she immediately replaced her husband with Claudius. The source of Ophelia's thought process, Polonius, is dead; she has been "divided from herself and her fair judgement (III, v, 85)." The last piece of text directly supports the idea that Ophelia cannot make decisions without a man, her father. When a person loses their ability to think clearly, they go insane. Ophelia cannot cope with Polonius's death, as her sanity dies with him. Laertes notes this in Act III, scene v, lines 159-160. "O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits should be as mortal as an old man's life?" is the question that Laertes agonizes over after learning of his sister's situation. If Ophelia had not been so dependent on her father for every single decision, she would still be able to think for herself, and retained her sanity. Ophelia's insanity as a result of Polonius' death is the epitome of the fact of men's power over women in Hamlet.

The presence of the power that the men have over the women in the play accomplishes several things overall. First of all, in the twenty-first century, this extreme dominance of men over women does not exist. Its presence in the play constantly reminds the reader of the time period in which the play is set, as it was written in the early 1600's. The amount of power that the men have in the play would not surprise, nor offend, a seventeenth or eighteenth-century audience. Secondly, Gertrude and Ophelia, the only women in the play, are the only two people who die "innocent" deaths, which emphasizes the "tragedy" of Hamlet. Gertrude and Ophelia die without the knowledge of the evil acts that have taken place, whereas most of the men die as the result of their own actions. The women are only the men's pawns in the play, and the men do as they wish with them. Claudius marries Gertrude without her knowing that he is the one who killed King Hamlet. Hamlet yells at and disrespects his mother, and plays with Ophelia as if she were some kind of doll. The power that the men have over the women in the play also provides for the comparison of Hamlet between the two genders. The women are portrayed as weak and submissive, so when Hamlet is accused of becoming a woman, it greatly offends him. Because revenge (and violence) drive the play, men's testosterone-driven power fits right in to the plot. Clearly, revenge is limited to be a concern of the men only. If women were the ones to have power over men, it would change the plot completely. Gertrude would never have married Claudius, Hamlet would not seek revenge, and Ophelia would be the one playing with Hamlet's mind. The men in the play have power over the women in order to accomplish all of these things, which proves to be very important.