

Female Characters in Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract

The annals of history reveal that the position of women in the society was extremely miserable. At the time of Shakespeare's plays women were bound to rules and convention of patriarchal Elizabethan era. In Shakespeare the male and female characters bear precisely the same relation to each-other that they do in nature and in society. He as observed and represented women carefully in his writings, showing both a positive and negative attitude toward the female characters. To Shakespeare woman is the pillar of the structure of the family. Unless she is powerful, the structure will collapse. He manifests this through his female characters. He has created the tragic women characters with perfection. He has given us artistically accomplished dramatic personas of Gertrude, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth.

Keywords : Decipherer, Predecessors, Ambivalent, Relationship, Realist, Treatment, Conflict

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The historical records reveal that the position of women in society was extremely miserable. At the time of Shakespeare's plays women were bound to rules and convention of patriarchal Elizabethan era. Women were to be seen and not heard. Hence, it was common that women were compelled into marriage in order to receive power, legacy, dowry and land in exchange.

Woman appeared as supporting and central character in Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic works. Shakespeare did write of characters that were strong and were witty. Women were different from female ideas in the time that he wrote. The role of women in Shakespeare's tragedies is vast and fascinating as Shirley Nelson states, "The

woman's part had the effect of de-centering the significant of the tragic hero to the point of challenging traditional assumptions about tragedy as a genre." ¹

He has scrutiny observed and represented women carefully in his writings showing both a positive and negative attitude towards the female characters especially in his tragedies. According to Virginia Woolf Shakespeare is the writer who made his writings transparent and free of any personal vices for delineating the women characters in his tragedies. Shakespeare with his extraordinary genius for portraying human behaviour, depicts the condition of women in a patriarchal society and his women characters who in their richness transcend limitations of time and Shakespearean theme becomes timeless. In

his plays the male and female characters bear precisely the same relation to each-other that they do in nature and in society. "Shakespeare saw man and woman as equal in a world that declared them unequal."²

Hamlet presents the dramatization of the helplessness of the 'feminine' qualities in the context of a patriarchal society. The two main female characters in Hamlet are Ophelia and Gertrude. Throughout the play, these two female characters are portrayed as weak, vulnerable and powerless. The men in their lives have complete control over them as is shown by the actions in the play, their willingness to do exactly what they are told and to agree to everything that is said to them.

Ophelia is easily persuaded to stop seeing Hamlet. She lacks the strength that would enable her to stand up for her lover or help her endure the murder of her father. Ophelia's thoughts and actions show she is completely obedient to her father. She sacrifices her personal feelings for Hamlet under the command of her father. She is overwhelmed by the loss of Hamlet. Her full pathos is brought to us when she appears wearing garlands of flowers and sings little bits of folk songs dealing with the loss of a loved one. In her madness she drowns herself to death. She is not able to bring reconciliation between her father and her lover. In the words of George Brandes, "She is a soft, yielding creature with no power of resistance; a loving soul, but without the passion which gives strength."³ She is too submissive, docile, innocent and inarticulate as opposed to Rosalind who has got wits and spirit as well as heart. Rosalind acts upon every other character in the play and Ophelia is acted upon by every other character in the play.

"But Ophelia is without intellect"⁴ writes John Masefield. We all pity her and she deserves over

pity. She has lived in a world of dumb ideas and fillings. She has never skirmished and pelted with men like bold and happy Rosalind, "A heroin like Rosalind has graduated from the school of adversity, and the lesson she has learnt is that even in life's darkest extremities she should not forget the claims of love and sacrifice, nor lose the innate joy of living."⁵

Gertrude, the queen and Hamlet's mother is one of the two women from whom Hamlet must infer what womanhood is and ultimately finds out, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" She is a weak woman but not a wicked one. Her relationship with Hamlet is somewhat turbulent, since he resents her marrying her husband's brother Claudius after he murdered the king (young Hamlet's father King Hamlet). Gertrude reveals no guilt in her marriage with Claudius after the recent murder of her husband and Hamlet begins to show signs of jealousy towards Claudius. He has an outraged sense of shame at his mother's conduct. He has a sacred image of a mother but that image has been shattered by his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage. However she is not fully aware of the enormity of her action in the eyes of her son. It was her weakness which became the cause of Hamlet's tragedy. But she was a true mother to Hamlet and was genuinely concerned about him.

The third character discussed here is Lady Macbeth.

"Lady Macbeth is a delineation in the human shape of woman, a wife, from out of the indeterminate flux of dark material nature that witches stand for"⁶

Gertrude's being an incestuous mother expressed the essential discord in these dark aspects of womanhood. Lady Macbeth is a 'barren wife' or even a 'barren mother'-if one considers

her. If her infant sucking at her breast stood in the way of her intention, she would snatch its head and beat it on a stone. But she will do so just to fulfill her husband's ambition to get the crown. There is not a word to suggest that she ever wished for the crown. She is feminine, plucky, and rather stupid, and sees nobody in the world but her husband, like the ideal Victorian wife. Early in the play she seems to be stronger and more ruthless of the two as she urges her husband to kill Duncan and seize the crown. After the bloodshed begins, however, she falls victim to guilt and madness to an even greater degree than her husband. The sleep-walking scene reveals the quality of her horror: she sees the facts that have happened, never consequences or possibilities. Even now "her restraint is terrible, for there is no emotional outburst." ⁷ Her conscience affects her to such an extent that she eventually commits suicide.

Shakespeare's women are, in the main, either good or bad. The middle region of character, where mixed motives predominate, belongs chiefly to the men. The women act not on thought, but on instinct, which, once accepted, admits of no argument. The elusiveness and breadth of Shakespeare's apprehension of feminine instinct cannot be over praised. He has no general theory, his women in comedies are often witty and daring, but they are never made all of wit and courage. Even Lady Macbeth's courage fails her when the affections of her childhood strike across for memory:

Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't.

(Act II, ii, 12-13)

Shakespeare's art works in few words in case of Ophelia. She is neither theorized nor does she belong to a type. She is, in a sense, born of the situation, and inspired by it. She does not have a thought or feeling that forgets the situation and

her own part in it, so that she wins the love of the readers by her very simplicity and intensity.

A type of confidence inspires the beautiful company of Shakespeare's self-devoted heroines. There is no Hamlet among them, no Jaques among his women of comedies. Their wit is quick and searching; but it is wholly at the command of their will, and is never employed to disturb or destroy. Love and service are as natural to them as breathing. They are the sunlight of the plays, obscured at times by clouds and storms of melancholy and misdoing, but never subdued or defeated. In the Comedies they are the spirit of happiness; in the tragedies, they are the only warrant and emblem of ultimate salvation, the last refuge and sanctuary of Faith.

Much has been written in England and elsewhere on the divine purity, humility, and innocence of these tragic heroines, and, no doubt, their fate is heart-breaking. But they are no purer, no more innocent, nor in any true sense more humble than the witty, loving, laughing, faithful, happy women of the comedies. They are tragic, not from any quality which they possess too good for this world. Such a quality does not exist. They are tragic, so far as far as they have responsibility for their fates- they are tragic from defect: because "they want what Rosalind's have got, clear heads and ready tongues as well as loving hearts, the gift to be happy". ⁸ They can do everything but understand. In ordinary life they are kind of women whom Shakespeare least liked to meet. Shakespeare felt for them and if their end was tragic, pitied them and made them pitiful to us.

But the women he admired and most delighted to portray were the women who carried their destinies with them, and in speaking and thinking as well as in feeling were the equals and superiors of men as Germaine Greer has said, "When the choice lies between the ultra-feminine

and the virago, Shakespeare's sympathy lies with the virago." ⁹ The point is that Shakespeare's ideal woman is positive, strong and self-sufficient, and that whenever she fails to be that, she ends tragically.

Shakespeare saw man and woman as equal in a world which declared them unequal but he cannot change the world in which he operates. Placed as he is, he cannot clearly satisfy the modern feminists, though they should recognize that he does not share the anti-feminist prejudices of his contemporaries. Indeed, as Virginia Woolf claimed, he possesses a genuinely 'androgynous' mind which refuses to accept the modern cult of "pitting of sex against sex of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority, belong to the private school of human existence where there are "sides"...." ¹⁰ Shakespeare thus is neither feminist nor an anti-feminist. He looks at women as human beings first and as women only secondarily. He did not deliberately set out to portray women. He wrote plays, in the infinite variety of which there is an almost infinite variety of insights into the nature of women plays about relationships of human beings, some of whom are male and some female. He is aware of the grave disabilities from which the women suffer. His advice to women would have been that, they should recognize these disabilities but, in the interest of domestic harmony, should try to get round them with intelligence, tact and patience.

Shakespeare's characters are gentle, kind, kind, and humorous. This is more so with women who are charming and dominate the action. Shakespeare has given us such a glittering array of heroines that Ruskin commented that in his comedies, "Shakespeare has only heroines and no heroes." ¹¹

Generally, female role perpetuates the stereotypical view of women, from the submissive and the obedient, to the ambitious and dominant. According to Phyllis Rackin, "Shakespeare himself updated the women he found in his resources to shape their role in forms that made them recognizable in terms of his contemporaries' expectation about women behavior and motivation." ¹² He has created the tragic women characters with perfection. Shakespeare has given us artistically accomplished dramatic personas of Gertrude, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth.

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