

Exploring The Role Of Gender In Shakespearean Tragedies: A Comparative Analysis Of Female Characters In "Hamlet," "Macbeth," And "Othello"

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Abstract

The author of this comparative analysis examines how women are portrayed in three of the Shakespeare's most well-known tragedies, "Hamlet," "Macbeth," and "Othello." The aim of this research is to identify the various ways that Shakespearean theater both reflects and challenges the widely held views about women that were common in Elizabethan society through an analysis of gender roles, agency, and societal limitations. The goal of this study is to provide light on the many roles that women perform within the patriarchal frameworks of Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Desdemona, as well as the multifaceted nature of femininity. Through an examination of these three distinct traits, this is achieved. This research attempts to illuminate the lasting significance of Shakespeare's examination of gender relations and its implications for modern audiences by carefully analyzing significant scenes and character interactions.

Keywords-: Shakespear, Play, Women, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's Macbeth's gender roles are the subject of a number of contentious criticisms, the most prominent of which is directed towards Lady Macbeth's portrayal. Despite the fact that a lot of critics contend that Lady Macbeth's aspirations for power are unquestionably masculinized, Stephanie Chamberlain argues in *Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England* that this power is "conditioned on maternity."

She contends that Lady Macbeth "momentarily empowering the achievement of an illegitimate political goal" by undermining the patrilineal system with depictions of infanticide and nursing. In spite of her attempts to provoke Duncan's death, Chamberlain ultimately argues that Lady Macbeth's power originates from a dominant source that is poignantly feminine.

Although this criticism is undoubtedly fair, seeing Lady Macbeth's brief rise to power as the result of a masculine invocation helps to better explain the play's fundamental elements. Within this analytical framework, her utilization of violent, abnormal imagery, like infanticide, signifies a complete rejection of the "maternal agency," or a typically feminine channel, rather than an attempt to seize power through it. Rather, Lady Macbeth uses cold, male indifference and violent masculinity to try to seize control. The strange tone that interrupts scenes with Lady Macbeth and other female characters that question the "natural gender order" in a patrilineal society lends credence to this idea. Shakespeare uses this association between the "unnatural" and women who aspire to power and status through masculine means rather than through patrilineage to justify his harsh punishments, which are appropriate given the early modern English social milieu in which the play was set. Madness is the result of Lady Macbeth's invocation of the masculine to access what was traditionally solely available to women through their place as mothers, a transgression of the "natural" order. Alienation is what it is for the witches.

Throughout the play "Hamlet," the figure of Ophelia serves as a vehicle through which the gender role is delicately woven into the fabric of the tragedy. The character of Ophelia exemplifies the very definition of surrender and obedience to the patriarchal norms that exist in her culture. The expectations that were placed upon women in Shakespearean England are exemplified by her connections with the men in her life, particularly her father Polonius and her brother Laertes. In the end, Ophelia's obedience turns out to be her fatal defect, as she becomes engaged in the power struggles that are taking place between Hamlet and her father. A society in which women are frequently consigned to passive roles, dominated by the whims and wishes of males, highlights the limitations of agency for women. Her spiral into madness and final suicide highlight the limitations of agency for women. The oppressive nature of gender norms and the tragic

repercussions of their implementation are brought to light by Shakespeare through the struggle of Ophelia.

In the play "Othello," the portrayal of gender is intricately intertwined with issues of race and jealousy, as demonstrated by the character of Desdemona. By marrying Othello, a Moorish general, Desdemona challenges the racial biases that are prevalent in Venetian society. This is because she opposes the conventions of society. The insecurities and misogyny of Othello ultimately lead to Desdemona's downfall, despite the fact that she is a devoted and innocent character. Because of Othello's jealousy, which is fed by Iago's devious plots, Desdemona's faithfulness is called into question, which finally leads to her terrible fate. The character of Desdemona is illustrative of the precarious position that women find themselves in in a world where men are always monitoring and policing their reputations and behaviors. A sad reminder of the devastating power of jealousy and the consequences of giving in to toxic masculinity, her tragic destiny serves as a poignant reminder of both of these effects. Shakespeare, by means of the story of Desdemona, investigates the intersections of gender, race, and power, so providing light on the complexity of identity and privilege in Renaissance society.

2. WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

William Shakespeare was an English poet, dramatist, and actor who lived from April 23, 1564, to April 23, 1616. He is regarded as the world's most inventive writer in the English language and the most brilliant dramatist. He is regarded as England's native poet and is called the "Bard of Avon" on several occasions. Approximately 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two large narrative poems, and a few additional lines—some of which are ambiguously attributed to him—comprise his corpus of work as it currently exists. Moreover, he collaborated with other writers on some of the poems in his body of work. More plays by him than by any other playwright have been performed, and they have been translated into every major language spoken in every nation on the planet today.

Most people agree that some of the best examples of Western and English language literature are the plays written by William Shakespeare. The 37 plays are often divided into four categories: tragic comedy, historical comedy, humorous comedy, and tragic comedy. They have been translated into every major language now in use and have been done consistently around the world.

2.1. Women in Shakespeare

Shakespeare's plays and poems are routinely discussed, and "Women in Shakespeare" is one of the subjects that comes up most frequently. Much criticism has been leveled against Shakespeare's female characters, both as leads and as supporting cast members. This criticism peaked in the 1960s during the second wave of feminism. And the "Dark Lady" of the sonnets has also been criticized. Numerous books and scholarly articles have addressed the issue of research in the field.

The earliest recorded appearance of women on stage in England dates back to the seventeenth century. Young boys were frequently cast as female parts in the plays of William Shakespeare. However, in the plays he published, Shakespeare did give his female characters important roles. He frequently gave male characters the roles of the protagonists while giving female people the main supporting parts. The lads were absolutely oblivious at the time of Shakespeare's skillful elevating of the status of the women over that of the men. Shakespearean female characters are often shown as having a sharp mind, cunning control, and mysterious beauty. The female actors portraying the roles mostly dictated the play's activities. An interesting coincidence is that several of Uranus' moons are named after Shakespearean heroines. John Ruskin said, in a very perceptive way, that Shakespeare "has no heroes, only heroines."

3. FAMOUS TRAGEDIES BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- Hamlet (1599–1601)
- Othello (1603–1604)
- Macbeth (1606)

3.1. Most recognized characters

- Desdemona, in Othello
- Lady Macbeth, in Macbeth
- Ophelia, in Hamlet

❖ Lady Macbeth - Macbeth

Lady Macbeth realizes that her husband is an obstacle to her strategy, even though she is intelligent and perceptive. Macbeth fears two things: the aftereffects of his wife's plot to take power and the afterlife. He holds himself and Duncan in the highest respect. He laments, "I have...only / Vaulting Ambition, which

overleaps itself." He tells Lady Macbeth that he does not want to carry out her plan to commit regicide when she stops him. They carry on talking. This is the moment when Lady Macbeth reveals the fierce and lustful part of herself. Because of the situation, Macbeth fears his wife, which makes him consent to the scheme. Shakespeare was taking a risk when he wrote this play as the audience was not used to the wife giving her husband orders in this way. Nevertheless, it does show how traits are applicable to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation.

Lady Macbeth's cunning is charming since it gives the image of being brave. Her strategies are never questioned about their effectiveness. She refers to Macbeth as womanly when he declares that he would not slay Duncan. She also gains control of the setting and the action when Macbeth shows the bloodied blade, he used to slay Duncan. Lady Macbeth steals the dagger and hides it in the guards' quarters because Macbeth is scared of what he has just done. This enables Macbeth to accuse the guards of committing the murder. In addition, she tries to reassure Macbeth whenever he expresses anxiety about hearing voices or about not being able to go asleep. She shows Macbeth that her hands are also bleeding as she makes her way back after planting the blade, signifying her accountability. She does not, however, want to be cowardly as he does. Her assertion that "a little water clears us of this Deed" is expressed with wonderful assurance. She won't feel horrible about what occurred when they wash the blood from their hands. She also paints an image of how easy it is to live a guilt-free life. In two different instances during the play, Macbeth is saved by Lady Macbeth's quick thinking. Lady Macbeth faints when Macbeth is telling the story of what happened to Duncan's sons, trying to draw attention away from the fact that Duncan's body has just been found. When Macbeth sees Banquo's spirit at the dinner scene and starts talking to it in front of everyone, Lady Macbeth keeps her composure and dismisses him by saying he's not feeling well. She accomplishes this by saying he doesn't feel good. She does a great job at deflecting the other characters' attention from Macbeth in each of these circumstances.

The absence of morality that characterizes Lady Macbeth ultimately plays a role in her downfall. Lady Macbeth is growing more concerned as a result of what they have done, while Macbeth is growing stronger and more confident. The wife and husband are very different from one another; she sees things positively, he sees

things negatively; he feels bad when she thinks negatively, and so on. At this moment, Lady Macbeth starts having visions and sleepwalking. She is even having trouble thinking while she talks, as seen by her voice, in contrast to her previous acts, where she had been more expressive. She confesses to killing Duncan and Banquo—both of whom she had earlier counseled Macbeth to kill—during one of her sleepwalking episodes. She is nervously washing her hands in an attempt to purge her soul of the embarrassment she feels as she relives the nights of the killings because the blood on her hands, or the guilt, has returned in her mind. "These hands won't ever be clean?" It is unlikely that the claim that she ridiculed Macbeth for not being the answer to his problems is accurate. Lady Macbeth eventually leaves the stage and passes away. Macbeth said that his "dearest partner of Greatness" had died, but that it had not affected him much. In the end, he turned out to be exactly the kind of cold, distant person she had always imagined him to be—just like her.

❖ Hamlet – Gertrude

It's probable that the complex bond between the mother and son will act as a template for the boy's future interactions with women. The play Hamlet offers a clear example of this. The play opens with the revelation that Hamlet's father has also died, and that Hamlet's mother married his uncle shortly after the King's death. Everyone present is celebrating the occasion of his uncle Claudius's marriage to Queen Gertrude. Claudius, now that he is king! Even though Hamlet is clothed in black and is still in grief, he can't help but express how unhappy he is with this marriage. "O, most wicked speed, to post / to incestuous sheets with such dexterity!" If Hamlet's mother marries again in the following two months, he will not trust his uncle since he also thinks that his mother's grief isn't real. Despite having a relatively little speaking role, Gertrude plays a crucial role in the narrative. Despite their reluctance, they both persist in acknowledging the extent of her influence and power on Hamlet. He remembers her having affections for his father, therefore he finds it puzzling that she has taken to him with such rapidity. Upon hearing the line, "Frailty, thy name is woman!- / A little month, or e'er those shoes were old / With which she followed my poor father's body," he starts to believe that any woman is weak. Throughout the play, Hamlet's confusion about the mysteries of love only deepens with regard to his mother. An indication that Hamlet has an oedipus complex is the fact that he

is upset with his mother for falling in love with someone else. Gertrude never tells Hamlet why she moved on so fast since she is a very private person.

❖ Ophelia

In order to carry out his revenge plan, Hamlet enlists the help of another woman in his life. Even though Hamlet and Ophelia are in love, his confusion concerning his mother and Claudius prevents him from controlling his emotions. Ophelia's father and brother want her to keep her distance from Hamlet, so she's not sure how to handle her affections for him. Ophelia is not a member of the royal family, which is the reason behind this. She declines Hamlet's admiration and yields to them instead. In this play, the true victim is Ophelia, the heroine who appears to be at the mercy of every man in her life. Hamlet may be seen tightly gripping Ophelia's wrist and maintaining a prolonged, intense stare. Ophelia informs us that Hamlet has become "mad".

His fixation with learning the truth about his father's fate is what makes him "mad." Moreover, he utilizes his insanity to express the truth without regard to the repercussions of his acts. Gertrude is unable to restrain herself, even if it appears that her care for Hamlet is sincere. She concurs with her new husband's schemes to trick Hamlet into giving him false information by making him friends with both of his pals and Ophelia. Ophelia feels disturbed that she followed in her father and brother's footsteps by turning down Hamlet's advances. In her opinion, Hamlet has likewise gone insane. Taking use of this idea, Hamlet gets angry with Ophelia at their "meeting" and demands, "Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" The purpose of Hamlet's remarks is to challenge Ophelia's conviction. giving the impression that all women are liars and that they shouldn't be allowed to be married. In a similar vein, he no longer has faith in his mother and does not trust Ophelia. He knows that Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia's father were watching since he knows that his mother was taking part in this plot. He is infatuated with Ophelia, and he holds all of his resentment at her on Claudius, Polonius, and his mother.

Gertrude insists on Hamlet sitting near to her for the duration of the performance. Hamlet sits with Ophelia following his rejection of his mother. He remarks on how quickly his mother's grief was resolved.

Ophelia dispels Hamlet's notion that all women are the same by standing up for Gertrude. He believes that they exhibit inconsistent conduct and are untrustworthy. According to Hamlet, his mother ought to have portrayed herself in a way reminiscent of the Player Queen from the drama "The Mousetrap." In response, the Player Queen says, "In second husband let me be accursed, / None wed the second but who kill'd the first," turning down the Player King's proposals. "In second husband: let me be cursed." Gertrude and Claudius, the ones who give the order to end the play and depart, do not think Hamlet is very innovative.

Gertrude begs Hamlet to meet with her before the play so they may talk about the current state of affairs and his prior "madness." Despite his sentiments, Hamlet acts rudely toward his mother right after informing her that he is not satisfied with her marriage. Gertrude is reluctant to listen to it since she is ill-prepared to cope with her own kid. His wish that she examine herself thoroughly is conveyed in the line "You go not until I set up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you." This is a terrifying way for him to communicate his desire. Gertrude is a quintessential illustration of a wife or lady from this age. In addition to being forbidden from expressing her own opinions and thoughts, she must obey her husband. He exhibits his thoughts throughout his narration of the events that have occurred. Gertrude starts to fear her own son. The ghost's appearance at this precise moment contradicts the work that Hamlet was accomplishing, leading Gertrude to lose faith in her son due to his strange new behavior. He tries to persuade her that he is a reliable source of information and has sound thinking. Gertrude never questions Claudius; he is the one person she ever believes. She has no faith in her own son. Because of this, Hamlet promises his mother—whom he sorely needs to believe in him—that he will prove this to her.

At last, Ophelia had conceded to her bewilderment over her love for Hamlet and her father's murder—which, she now admits was her own fault—after Hamlet unintentionally murdered him. She has yielded to her perplexity. In a way that beyond comprehension, she sings her responses to Gertrude's queries. She gives the flower to her brother, Gertrude, and Claudius. Her gift to Hamlet, the flower, is a representation of what she could never have given him: her love and herself. Ophelia was assassinated as a part of Hamlet's scheme to get revenge, which included taking advantage of her and murdering her father. Besides, she wasn't sure how she would run

her life without her controlling father. Hamlet tells his mother and Ophelia's brother at her funeral that he "loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love, / Make up my sum." Hamlet is expressing his love for Ophelia. In this case, Gertrude defends her child and tries to keep him safe. She also supports him during his fight with Ophelia's brother Laertes. In the play, Hamlet's mother gives him a cup and a handkerchief to wipe his forehead, giving him his first taste of her love. This places him ahead of the game and offers him a sense of confidence. Hamlet triumphs, and as he does, the cup that she raises to him kills her. The purpose of the cup the King had made was to poison Hamlet. Hamlet kills his mother Gertrude as part of his revenge scheme, making her one of the victims. Eventually, Gertrude passes away, happy in the knowledge that her son loved and looked after for her. Shame-ridden, Ophelia dies knowing that she caused Hamlet's insane actions.

❖ **Desdemona in Othello**

One figure from Othello who is connected to femininity is Desdemona. She is referred to be a wife in addition to a daughter. Her role will be determined by how she behaves with the male characters, and the men will also influence her outward appearance.

Desdemona is the same heroine in Shakespeare's play Othello; Othello's jealousy and love for his wife are the causes of the play's tragedy. Desdemona is a helpless character in both plays who is readily duped by Iago or her own wants. She does, however, seem stronger and more assertive in Goodnight Desdemona than in the other play.

She is a weak character in Othello because, as she approaches death, she is powerless to defend herself against her husband's accusations or his rage. Likewise, she is blind to the fact that her actions against Cassio have contributed to Othello's rage. She just acts in the way that Iago anticipates she will act in the particular situation, without seeming to be thinking about what she is doing. It is likely that part of what ultimately led to her death was her incapacity to exercise critical thought. But even while she's motivated and intent on reaching her objectives in Goodnight, Desdemona, she can't help but be controlled by her feelings. She is rather bold, as seen by the sentence "I'll split her head upon a pike for daws to peck at." This phrase is an example of the snap

decisions she makes concerning Constance that ultimately lead to problems. While Desdemona is trying to figure out how to get rid of the intruder, she says this to Iago during their chat. Iago is advising her to prove Constance's guilt before acting. In both plays, Desdemona serves as the foundation for most of the complications, yet she is not a very complicated character. It doesn't matter how foolish and beneficial her ideas are—as in the case of *Othello*—or how bold and forceful they are—as in the case of *Goodnight Desdemona*—because her simple-mindedness and lack of critical thinking skills are what get her into trouble. She is ultimately to blame for the issues that develop in each of these tales, and any play might have saved her a great lot of pain if it had been a little more creative. Nevertheless, she was here to make problems, not to carry out this task. Her part during the play was innocent, which allowed Iago to use his power over nearly everyone and advance the plot. Desdemona is demanding that Constance be punished by every means, even before she is informed of the true circumstances.

❖ Emilia

Emilia is a character in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*. The character originally appeared in print in the brief story "Un capitano Moro," which was published in 1565 as part of Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*. As the "ensign's wife," the figure is described as youthful and pious there and goes on to make friends with Desdemona in Cyprus. She is called Emilia in Shakespeare, and she is Desdemona's attendant as well as the wife of Iago, Othello's ensign. She may only play a minor role in the play, but she has been represented on movie by several well-known actresses, including one who received an Academy Award nomination.

In scene 2.1, Emilia makes her theatrical debut when she disembarks in Cyprus alongside Iago, Desdemona, and Roderigo. This is true even though Othello first introduces the character in scene 1.3 when he asks Iago to let his wife travel to Cyprus with Desdemona as her attendant. She jokes about with her friends for a little while before heading off stage, maybe to follow Desdemona out of town. Although her identity is not given, it is quite likely that she makes her appearance as Desdemona's servant, vanishes, and then reappears during the combat that left Cassio disappointed.

After the meeting, Iago comes up with a scheme to have Emilia "move for Cassio to her mistress" on her own.

To Emilia, Cassio begs, "give me the advantage of some brief discourse with Desdemona alone." Emilia also agrees to his proposal. Emilia witnesses the encounter between Cassio and Desdemona in the third scene. Another time Desdemona comes in Othello is when she asks him to welcome the lieutenant. Emilia finds Desdemona's handkerchief in the same moment, but she chooses to give it to Iago instead of keeping it for herself because he had been pressuring her to take ownership of it. He prohibits her from disclosing the information to anybody else after he has taken it. Emilia claims not to know anything about the handkerchief when Desdemona asks her about it later in the narrative. Emilia tries to console a distraught Desdemona after Othello loses his temper over the handkerchief. Desdemona fiercely maintains her innocence when Othello questions her later in the play. The discussion between her and Desdemona about their differing views on marriage and loyalty ensues. Emilia argues for equality and respect for both partners in a marriage, saying she would cheat if it meant her husband had everything. She goes on to say that men are to fault. She not only alerts Othello to Roderigo's death but also to Cassio's attempted murder. Iago, Montano, and Gratiano show up in answer to her cry for help. Emilia charges Iago of carrying out a horrible act of dishonesty that resulted in an unjust death as soon as she learns from Othello that Iago had informed him that Desdemona was "cheating" on him with Cassio. When she finally reveals her identity and tells Iago where the handkerchief is, he threatens to kill her. Speaking of Desdemona's innocence as she passes away, laying near to her mistress, is what follows next. Throughout the play, Iago makes two distinct claims that he is certain Emilia is betraying both Othello and Cassio. He sometimes justifies his acts and conduct by citing this conviction. Nevertheless, Iago's suspicions are not substantiated by much evidence in the play, if any evidence at all. After Desdemona is killed, Emilia confronts Othello, but she decides to ignore his warnings. She accuses her own husband of being responsible for the murder later on, saying that she was the one who found the handkerchief and delivered it to the victim. This leads to her husband stabbing her, and in the play's last act, she passes away.

4. CONCLUSION

I provided data in the preceding section that demonstrates the importance of women in all fields throughout that time. They have important duties to do in addition to embodying the qualities of heroes. The ladies are the play's main characters and center on them throughout. The characters in any play that this work would probably come across, include Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, Gertrude, Goneril, Regan, and Hamlet, along with the explanations they provided for their involvement. I selected this work in order to honor and value the contributions made by women who play important roles in Shakespearean plays to society.

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