

# Revisiting Shakespeare and Gender Ideology

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**Abstract:** Shakespeare wrote his plays with the sole intention of staging them and it can be assumed that he probably did not mean to publish them in the print form. It was only after his death that his plays were compiled and given a readable form by the actors who performed in his plays. Hence there are a variety of versions of Shakespeare's plays giving rise to the question of authenticity. However scholars have toiled for many years and his texts have been refined by them and given a widely acceptable form now.

Understanding the position, status and the role played by women during the Elizabethan age of Shakespeare will help in understanding of the problems related to women since ages. The unvoiced agonies of women suffered through centuries might have been articulated knowingly or unknowingly by the genius of Shakespeare. A thorough and close analysis of his women characters will definitely throw more light on the issue.

Apart from mere underlying representation of the women of his times, Shakespeare might as well be a guiding light as to how the gender disparity be reduced or be rid of. With Feminism, began a new awareness and attitude of viewing everything with a woman's perspective, irrespective of whether the play is by women, of women or not. Women began to question the responsibilities thrust on them by nature and society since ages. A woman's position, though has begun to change has not changed much as Beavour says, "The two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change"(Beavour, 26).<sup>1</sup> How defective, flawed and biased the attitude was toward the women in those days and even to this day can be understood by the following quote by Millet- "They have been considered a dependency class who have lived on surplus. And their marginal life frequently renders them conservative, for like all persons in their situation (slaves are examples here) they identify their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them. (Millet, 38)

This paper deals with an analysis of the women characters in the Shakespearean tragedies. The manner in which they have been portrayed by the great playwright is closely examined to know thoroughly how Shakespeare has treated his women characters. The characters are put through many perspectives of criticism and re-evaluated in terms of modern literary-theoretical stances. They are compared with the male characters created by the great playwright to analyse whether Shakespeare's treatment of his women characters is any different from the way he has portrayed the male characters.

## Lady Macbeth

We shall begin with Lady Macbeth who can be described as a formidable version of a woman who dominates her weak-willed husband. However, it would be wrong to consider her as a monster. On the contrary, she is perhaps more than usually feminine. She is conscious of her woman's breasts, her mother's milk; knows "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me"<sup>ii</sup> and when she thinks to carry out the murder herself, fails because Duncan reminds her of her father. That is ample proof that she is a woman with a gentle and human heart too, unlike the belief held contrary to it. Macbeth calls her his dearest "chuck", and she speaks, when sleepwalking, of her "little hand". In other words she can be described as a woman who was feminine as well as masculine, who was good as well as evil.

The originality and self-control of Lady Macbeth throughout the play is astonishing, and barely resembles the character of a delicate woman. It is only in private that she shows her fatigue, and only after her nervous breakdown that she relents control. However, this does not negate the supremacy and strength that she has revealed up to this point.

Shakespeare presents the conflicting character of Lady Macbeth. Upon receiving her husband's letter about the witches' prophesies, she attempts to be like a man in order to exude the strength needed to gain additional social status as royalty. Lady Macbeth appears to be very influential in planning – deciding when and how they should kill King Duncan – and chiding her husband for not acting more like a man; yet, despite these capabilities, she is the main reason for the revealing of the Macbeth's part in the usurpation of the throne. First shown as an iron willed character willing to "pluck my nipple from my child's boneless gums, And dash the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this" to latter being shown as possessed by nightmares of guile (I.vii), how could such a strong character so quickly fall prey to uneasiness? According to materialist feminism theory, despite her earlier show of strength, Lady Macbeth's eventual weakness is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender.

Lady Macbeth, the Clytemnestra of English tragedy, is naturally drawn as a frustrated wife to Macbeth. She possesses "a terribly determined will", (ibid) an iron stability of resolve. It is to her what imagination is to Macbeth, the feature that transcends and dominates all others in the character. It is the secret of her influence over him and of her success in winning him to consent. It enables her to carry her share in the plot through, to remedy his errors, and come to his rescue in the great crises of the action. But it proves her ruin. It makes her impose upon herself and bear, for a time, a strain beyond the ultimate endurance of the rest of her powers. In fact, her imperious will, like his excess of the imaginative faculty, disturbs the proper relation of the forces of character. An abnormal element that knows no restraint of conscience or common prudence, that reeks nothing of foresight or fear, it is the source of abnormal efforts, the reaction from which wrecks the whole fabric. She has extreme self-reliance, unlike Macbeth, who turns instinctively to her for co-operation, until his sense of menacing retribution substitutes its fatal stimulus. Intellectually, too, she is Macbeth's superior, as Portia is the intellectual superior of Bassanio, and Rosalind of Orlando. With what dexterity she meets Macbeth's reluctances to go further in the work and assails his weak points: how swiftly she perceives -

too late - the effect of the deed on Macbeth; what resource and alertness of brain is brutalised by crime, her finer spirit is broken by the reaction from moral self-violence.

Lady Macbeth and Hamlet stand apart from the rest of Shakespeare's creations in the intensity and perplexity of the interest they arouse. "Of all the women Shakespeare has drawn, none exercises so strange a fascination (not even the "serpent of old Nile") as this fragile, indomitable northern Queen, who makes the great denial - denial of her sex- and greatly suffers, even to the death." (Dowden, 93) Lady Macbeth is ruined from within; her dream for her husband, accelerated by his letter, on time the murder and in the carrying out of it she does not give up weakness by a single tremble, knowing that if she does her husband will never gain out their plan. Nothing points the way to her mind's bother but it is finally realistic in the brief scene that show it; she has lost her hold on the dreadfulness she has tried to manage ("Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?"). Macbeth's nature keep him harassed to the end ("Yet I will try the last"), even though he accepts that 'Life's but a walking shadow...a tale told by an idiot....' (ibid) as he is the man of ambition.

### DESDEMONA

It is only relatively recently that the character of Desdemona has been accorded the kind of critical attention always received by the two leading male roles. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were many who shared Thomas Rymer's<sup>iii</sup> distaste at the very fact of her marrying a black moor. Even Coleridge was taken aback by a noble Venetian lady's choice of 'a veritable negro' for a husband; and other critics, less restrained, were convinced that she was 'little less than a wanton', or 'strumpet-like', or a moral coward lacking in any self-respect. Modern versions of such disapproval have been less extreme and the range from B. Spivack's<sup>iv</sup> odd conviction that Cassio and Desdemona are really in love with one another to Auden's belief that 'given a few more years of Othello and Emilia's influence...she might well, one feels, have taken a lover'.

However, such anti-Desdemona opinions are an exception rather than the rule. As Marvin Rosenberg<sup>v</sup> has noticed, she has more frequently during the present century been 'in grave danger of being canonized'. As early as 1904 A.C. Bradley<sup>vi</sup> had started the dehumanizing trend with his opinion that she is 'ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint'; and others have followed his example, transforming her variously into the world of the spirit that Iago wishes to destroy, or a life-force for order, community, growth and light, or goodness and purity personified, or the supreme value of love.

In a general way all these opinions depend on our seeing Desdemona's life in the play as being dependent on how we view Othello - on our assuming that she is, although in a very different way, as dramatically dependent on the hero as Iago is. But, as a recent writer has stated, 'the significance of the play is deepened by what is shown in her individual inner experience to be - especially what it shows in her love for Othello and her ways of responding to him throughout the action. When taken as a person in her own right, Desdemona may be seen to have a more complex character than she was credited with in earlier criticism, the principal lineaments of which are already clear. Her sexuality is directly faced and stress is laid upon 'her sensual attraction to Othello, which she never thinks of denying' and which is the part of her nature that makes her powerfully gorgeous and eye catching to all the men in the play. The independence of spirit that leads her to defy society's conventions, to be half the wooer, and to beg before

the full Senate for permission to accompany her husband to Cyprus is seen to be the same strong point in her that 'enables her to tolerate the public humiliation of a blow, to insist to raging Othello that she is indeed honest, and to argue her innocence with considerable passion'. Even her ability to deceive her father is interpreted as evidence of the amazing control over her true feelings which she later exercises on the beach, and on public occasion and in private encounter in the final scenes.

The two chief aspects of this 'new' Desdemona that force a reconsideration of her role in the moral scheme of the play are the particular qualities of her innocence and her love. Both are connected with a sexual self-consciousness which is 'neither an ignorant nor a repressed state of mind' but is 'the mark of her absolutely positive moral standing when contrasted with sexually self-conscious, self-torturing and destructive personalities of her persecutors. Her love is something larger than the helpless affection found in most traditional accounts. Her relationship with her husband is every bit as all-embracing as his love for her. It is 'more crucial to her than her life; and in recognizing that she cannot exist without his love, accepting her death is the only way she has of being circumstanced, shutting herself up to Fortune's alms, by a kind of suicide'. For this seventeenth-century feminist a tragic death is preferable to relinquishing responsibility for her own life.

Visually and symbolically the opposition of black and white is at work. And this is explored in all its variants: evil and good, deceit and fairness, illusion and reality, ignorance and knowledge, dishonesty and honesty, hate and love, death and life. These polarities, however, are not offered as a series of defined alternatives that this listing suggests; rather, all the terms are dramatically and poetically redefined. Iago is perceived by everyone as 'honest' which in actuality means 'dishonest'; Desdemona appears to Othello to be 'unchaste, but in reality 'honest'. Physically Othello is black like the devil, yet it is beneath the skin of Iago that the real devil lurks. But then Desdemona's whiter skin then is not the sepulchre concealing her dishonour but the symbol of her purity and Iago's seductive display of rationalism is not the divine function of the honest but a perversion. It is instead Othello's instinctive response to life that is always 'reasonable'.

The whole play is based on the different ways a single object may be comprehended because of divergent human perspectives, interpretations and natural prejudice. In Ordinary lives it is difficult to maintain black-and-white divisions in any of the beliefs by which we order our lives. Circumstances demand the modification of our ideals, conditions force upon us reduced aspirations and narrowed expectations. We know that each time we make such an adjustment we are parting with the part of ourselves. Yet we hope even as we make the inevitable compromise it does not entail the destruction of the ideals involved. But the tragic hero is not ordinary. He is someone who is willing to live out the truth of his being regardless of the consequences; and for this attempt he pays the full price.

### Ophelia

Of all the crucial characters in Hamlet, Ophelia is the most stagnant and one-dimensional. She has the potential to become a tragic heroine - to rise above the adversities inflicted upon her- but she instead sinks into madness, becoming simply tragic. This is because Ophelia herself is not as important as her depiction of the dual nature of women in the play. Ophelia's distinct purpose is to point out at Hamlet's deformed view of women as unfeeling sexual predators, and the purity and virtue of women.

The extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by Gertrude is far more apparent with the addition of Ophelia to the play. Hamlet's feelings of fury against his mother can be aimed at Ophelia, who is, in his opinion, hiding her base nature behind an impression of faultlessness.

Through Ophelia we observe Hamlet's development, or de-evolution into a man convinced that all women are whores; that the women who seem most pure are inside black with dishonesty and sexual desire. And if women are harlots, then they must have their procurers. Gertrude has been made a whore by Claudius, and Ophelia has been made a whore by her father. In Act II, Polonius makes preparations to use the fascinating Ophelia to find out why Hamlet is behaving so peculiarly. But for others Ophelia symbolises something very different. To those who are not blinded by hurt and rage, Ophelia is the essence of goodness. Very much like Gertrude, young Ophelia is childlike and naïve. Unlike Queen Gertrude, Ophelia has good reason to be unaware of the harsh realities of life. She is very young, and has lost her mother possibly at birth. Her father, Polonius, and brother, Leartes, love Ophelia extremely, and have taken great pains to shelter her. She is not involved with matters of state; she spends her days no doubt engaged in knitting and flower gathering. She returns the love shown to her by Polonius and Leartes tenfold, and couples it with complete and unwavering loyalty. "Her whole character is that of simple unselfish affection" (Bradley 130). Even though her love for Hamlet is strong, she obeys her father when he tells her not to see Hamlet again or accept any letters that Hamlet writes. Her heart is pure, and when she does something dishonest, such as tell Hamlet that her father has gone home when he is really behind the curtain, it is out of valid fear. Her frailty and innocence work against her as she cannot cope with the unfolding of one distressing event after another. Ophelia's darling Hamlet causes all her emotional pain throughout the play, and when his hate is responsible for her father's death, she has endured all that she is capable of enduring and goes insane. But even in her insanity she symbolizes, to everyone but Hamlet, incorruption and virtue. "In her wanderings we hear from time to time an undertone of the deepest sorrow, but never the agonized cry of fear or horror which makes madness dreadful or shocking. And the picture of her death, if our eyes grow dim in watching it, is still purely beautiful." (Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy 132-3).<sup>vii</sup> The coarse songs that she sings in front of Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius are somber reminders that the corrupt world has taken its toll on the pure Ophelia. They show us that only in her insanity does she live up to Hamlet's false opinion of her as a lascivious woman.

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Shakespeare did write strong and memorable female characters, but his strongest women are portrayed as villains. One of the chief vices with which he charges women is ill temper in one form or another. Women are portrayed as wrangling women, characterized as misbehaved and shallow, self-absorbed, scolding and shrewd. They are constant, fearful and weak-minded. The most common vices of which Shakespeare accuses women are cowardice and physical weakness. Sometimes the terms are applied directly to the female characters.

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