Abstract: Shakespeare's representation of women, and the ways in which his female roles are interpreted and enacted, have become topics of scholarly interest. Shakespeare's heroines encompass a wide range of characterizations and types. Within the gallery of female characters, Shakespeare's women characters display great intelligence, vitality, and a strong sense of personal independence. These qualities have led some critics to consider Shakespeare a champion of womankind and an innovator who departed sharply from flat, stereotyped characterizations of women common to his contemporaries and earlier dramatists. Contrastingly, other commentators note that even Shakespeare's most favorably portrayed women possess characters that are tempered by negative qualities. They suggest that this indicates that Shakespeare was not free of misogynistic tendencies that were deep-seated in the culture of his country and era. William Shakespeare lived during the Elizabethan era and wrote all his works based on the society of that time. The Elizabethan era was a time when women were portrayed to be weaker than men. During that time it was said that “women are to be seen, and not heard.” In this article an attempt has been taken to explore Shakespeare’s presentation of women in his tragedies demonstrating his feelings about women and their roles in society.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Femininity, Monarch, Masculinity, Stereotypical.

The historical records reveal that the position of women in the society was extremely miserable. Women occupied a very inferior position and were always oppressed. It was a natural phenomenon and practiced in every house—whether rich or poor. Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist,

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has observed it very minutely and represented it carefully in his writings. In Shakespeare’s writing, he shows positive attitude towards the female characters especially in his famous tragedies: *Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet*. 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 the limitations of time and Shakespearean theme becomes timeless.

Shakespeare's treatment of Ophelia of the tragedy *Hamlet* begins with an exploration of the effects of a patriarchal system upon the character. Ophelia, it would seem, wholly at the mercy of the male figures throughout her life, is certainly a victim figure. Although it has been claimed by critics that Hamlet is unique amongst Shakespeare's tragic heroes, who is not to blame for the tragedy of the play, but if we are to consider the death of the heroine as part of this tragedy then surely we must question Hamlet's innocence. In his treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet oscillates between undying love and cruelty as reflected in his cold and accusing speech in the 'nunnery scene'. In short, Hamlet throughout the play uses Ophelia as a tool in his revenge plan.

To examine this culpability more deeply, however, it could be suggested that it is Queen Gertrude's behaviour that has instigated Hamlet's unforgivable treatment of Ophelia: She transgresses the patriarchal bounds of femininity by marrying so soon after her husband's death and not remaining in passive grief and obedient devotion to his memory. This provides Hamlet with a model of women's inconstancy. His bitterness leads him to believe that all women are untrustworthy - 'Frailty thy name is woman'. Whichever way we view his culpability, Ophelia suffers as a result of Hamlet's patriarchal values of womanhood.

With regard to her father and brother, the two direct ruling male forces in her life, Ophelia is also very much a victim. Unquestioningly obeying their remonstrance against pursuing a relationship with Hamlet, she rejects his advances which of course she believes to be genuine and thus when he pretends to be mad she believes it to be her fault. Her speech reflects her deep and genuine sorrow:

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“And I of ladies, most deject and wretched
That sucked honey of his music vows
O woe is me”. (III.i.157-62)

Ophelia's feeling of guilt is reinforced by Polonius's insistence on King Claudius:

“But Yet I do believe
The origin and commencement of this grief
Sprung from neglected love” (III.i.177-80)

Polonius's conviction, in which one can't help believing, stems from a mercenary desire to marry his daughter off to such an eligible husband as the prince of Denmark, rather than a genuine belief in his daughter's role in causing Hamlet's madness.

Thus when Hamlet murders her father, Ophelia enters a double realm of guilt, believing herself to be blamed for both Hamlet's madness and her father's death. As a result she becomes mad. Ophelia has been defended by some feminist critics like Elaine Showalter. She thinks that Ophelia is surrounded by powerful men: her father, brother and Hamlet. All these disappear: Laertes leaves, Hamlet abandons her and Polonius dies. Conventional theories had argued that without these three powerful men making decisions for her, Ophelia is driven into madness.

Ophelia, the dominated daughter, is completely dependent. Although a flash of her potential self-will shines through at the beginning of the play, when we learn that Ophelia has entertained Hamlet without paternal consent, this is stifled very quickly by Polonius and Laertes - the double voice of the patriarchy, telling her that she is naive and that her behaviour is unsuitable. Ophelia, daunted by their claims that she has mistaken Hamlet's love, assumes that her father and brother necessarily know best and replies simply 'I will obey'. Shakespeare shows, however, that it is this obedience of Ophelia that leads to her own destruction, and illustrates that when the guiding male is like the cynical Polonius or the unperceptive Laertes, the fate of the subordinate female is considerably threatened.

In the later tragedy, Othello, it can also be argued that the tragedy occurs from adherence to patriarchal rules and stereotypes. Gayle Greene summarises this position in her claim that the tragedy of Othello
stems from “men's misunderstandings of women and women's inability to protect themselves from society's conception of them”. Certainly Desdemona's very much feminised qualities of passivity, softness and obedience are no match for Othello's masculine qualities of dominance, aggression and authority. After Othello in his jealousy has struck Desdemona and spoken harshly to her, she tells Iago, 'I am a child to chiding'. Protected by a system which makes women the weaker, dependent sex, Desdemona is unequipped to deal with such aggression; she is helpless against Othello. Desdemona thus retreats into childlike behaviour to escape from reality.

At the close of the play Othello attempts to vindicate himself from intentional murder by claiming that he did nothing 'in malice', but is simply a man “that loved not wisely but too well”. This speech illustrates the precarious position of love in a society submerged in stereotypes. Othello's excessive, 'unwise' love for Desdemona is tied up with his perception of her as representing perfect womanhood, and his underlying fear of her - endorsed by society - as whore. Like Hamlet, who tells Ophelia 'get thee to a nunnery' in order to protect her chastity and remove his fear of woman's infidelity, Othello too wishes to erase Desdemona's sexuality and potential for infidelity. His decision to kill her, he claims, is to prevent her from a further transgression – “Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men” (V.iii.6). As Iago's insinuations build, the gulf between this perception of Desdemona as angel and the fear of her as whore grows, leaving Othello in a void of confusion and doubt: “By the world,/ I think my wife be honest, and think she is not./I think thou art just, and then think thou art not.” (III.iii.388-90) In Othello's refusal to hear Desdemona's own protestations of innocence, Othello is very much a tragedy in which the female is subordinated by the male.

While Ophelia silently and obediently accepts the oppression of male power, turning her distress in upon herself in her madness, Desdemona does display some traces of a more Cleopatra-like self-assertion. In her choosing of Othello as her husband, she exercises her own desire, subverting the female role of passivity within the patriarchy, and marries him without parental consent. This is a rather courageous act of will, which could have resulted in much strife. However, she handles the situation with cleverness and a manipulation which outwits the male
judges who listen to her. When her father questions her about her marriage she answers forcefully, first pacifying him and then justifying her disobedience on the very grounds of patriarchal obedience and duty:

“My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound, for life and education;
You are the lord of my duty!
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother show’d
To you preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor, my lord.” (I.iii.180-89)

Desdemona by her cleverness thus appears obedient in her disobedience.

Shakespeare shows Desdemona's behaviour in her relationship with Othello before the marriage to be slightly manipulative also. For Desdemona tells Othello in a very suggestive way after she has fallen in love with him, as Othello himself relates –“if I had a friend that loved her/I should but teach him how to tell my story./And that would woo her” (I.iii.165-67). However, when she is married she slips into the role of the submissive wife. Obedient to Othello's every command, she says to Emilia - after Othello tells her peremptorily 'Get you to bed on th'instant' - 'we must not now displease him'. At this point Desdemona becomes more of a stereotype, her identity disappearing as Othello's jealousy becomes more defined. Her identity diminishes until she fits into the stereotype of the silent woman. Othello denies her right to a voice when he soliloquises:

“Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,/ Made to write 'whore' upon?” (IV.ii.171-72)

Shakespeare shows Desdemona to be the virtuous character who is finally vindicated. Desdemona's goodness furthermore is not simply passive or weak but an act of will. Her refusal to blame Othello for his terrible treatment of her, when he suspects her of betrayal, must not be viewed as simple subservience but as a self-willed refusal to accept a
bad opinion of the husband she has chosen. When he is behaving deplorably towards her she refuses to acknowledge his identity – “My lord is not my lord,’ she says ’nor should I know him/Were he in favour as in humour altered.”(III.iv.124-25) She stands by her acceptance of her love for him as something sacred, with a martyr-like determination. She tells Emilia “his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love.”(IV.ii.161-62) She thus obeys her own heart rather than patriarchal rules, extending this determination through to death, so that with her last breath - when Emilia asks 'who hath done this deed?' she can reply 'Nobody, I myself'. V.iii.130-31. Othello's conviction that even upon dying she lies by claiming this self-death bears witness to the whole tragedy of the play, Othello's inability to see beneath the surface of stereotypical conceptions of femininity. By claiming this death for herself she re-affirms her self-hood. Metaphorically then she dies for her love which cannot be tainted, not from Othello's hands. In Hamlet too, Ophelia's death can perhaps be seen as an act of assertion and escape from the confining patriarchal world.

In Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare again explores the idea of the victim within a patriarchal society. However, in this play the gender roles are inverted and it is Antony who is the true victim. Stiffled by the rules of the patriarchal society of Rome which expects him to retain a masculine side only, and not to adopt the feminine qualities of passion, emotion, and love, Antony's control over his life diminishes. Within such patriarchal confines, the role of lover must be subordinate to the male's political role. After finding an extraordinary and powerful love with Cleopatra - which Shakespeare establishes to perfection - Antony is unable to accept the 'business first' principle of the patriarchal laws. Like the typical female heroine of a tragedy, Antony's plight escalates when he is rushed into an arranged marriage of convenience. He cannot remain away from Cleopatra and faithful to Octavia who symbolises Caesar and the power of Patriarchal Rome. He says 'though I make this marriage for my peace,/ I'th' East my pleasure lies'. (II.iii.50-51) Inevitably he returns to Egypt and Cleopatra, and causes a rift which can never again be cemented between himself and Caesar, which ultimately results in war.

Cleopatra's masculine qualities counterbalance the play, so Shakespeare provides us with a relationship of surprising equality. Neither Cleopatra
nor the relationship can be stifled within the confines of the patriarchy of the seventeenth century. The distinctions between masculine and feminine are blurred - in a sense Antony and Cleopatra swap roles, continually embracing both their masculine and feminine selves and thus experiencing a full bonding of souls. As Woodbridge says, 'Antony and Cleopatra can cross gender boundaries without losing their sex roles as man or woman'. This swapping of gender roles is rather shockingly portrayed in the scene in which Cleopatra puts her 'tires and mantles on him whilst / I wore his sword Phillipan'. (II.v.26-27) Shakespeare evidently recognises the existence of both masculine and feminine qualities within females and males.

Cleopatra, unlike Othello and Ophelia, is the dominating force of the play in terms of theme and also her personal presence. Novy claims that *Antony and Cleopatra* is the only tragedy that 'glorifies woman as actor'. Through his treatment of Cleopatra, Shakespeare provides us with a 'real' woman rather than a stereotype. Velma Richmond claims further that in Cleopatra we can find Shakespeare's 'finest embracing of the feminine'. Cleopatra through the combination of sexual and political power is a force to be reckoned with.

Cleopatra's sexuality, despite condemnation by the patriarchal men - she is referred to as 'strumpet' and 'whore' on various occasions throughout the play - is unhidden and unrestricted. Her sexual power over men is conveyed boldly, for example, in her descriptions of her former conquests 'great Pompey' and 'Broad-fronted Caesar'. Cleopatra's sexuality is not a thing to be locked up, as in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, but is celebrated as a positive force. Surprisingly, even Enobarbus, despite his patriarchal views, does on occasions present her as positively sexual as his unforgettable description of her indicates:

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“Age cannot wither her,
Nor custom stale her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless she is riggish.” (II.ii.276-82)
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Refusing to adhere to the stereotypes of patriarchal society, Cleopatra transforms her natural sexuality into part of her power rather than as a diminishing of her goodness. So too, Cleopatra insists on fulfilling a
political role against the wishes of the patriarchal men. When Enobarbus attempts to prevent her from doing so, she replies in enraged determination:

“A charge we bear i'th'war,
And as the president of my kingdom will
Appear there for a man. Speak not against it.
I will not stay behind.” (III.vii.21-24)

Cleopatra thus forces her access to the male arena, where Ophelia and Desdemona fail to do so. Cleopatra naturally has more freedom. She is not dependent upon anyone financially, as are Ophelia and Desdemona.

Obedience and silence were very much part of the patriarchal conception of femininity which Cleopatra refuses to adhere. When Charmian traditionally suggests that the way to gain and retain Antony's love is to 'In each thing give him way, Cross him in nothing' (I.iii.11). Cleopatra replies, 'Thou teachest like a fool; the way to lose him'(I.iii.12). Far from being the silent woman, Cleopatra makes her voice heard whenever she wishes, challenging and meeting challenges. She mocks Antony and quarrels with him. Challenging him with a masculine aggression when they argue - 'I would I had thine inches; Thou shouldst know/ There were a heart in Egypt' (I.iii.48-49). Spirited and passionate, such displays of assertion as her physical attack on the messenger informing her of Antony's marriage to Octavia, are a far cry from the passive silent role of the feminine in patriarchal society. In passionate disbelief and anger, she draws a knife on the messenger and strikes him with her bare hands. Charmian tries to pacify her by telling her 'Good madam keep yourself within yourself” (II.v.98-99), but Cleopatra escapes the bounds of self-composure and the repression of self-hood. Her reaction when she feels herself wronged is in very stark contrast to the reactions of Ophelia and Desdemona.

Unsurprisingly though, it is through the character of Cleopatra that Shakespeare really depicts death as an assertion of self-hood and an act of defiance to the patriarchal laws. Cleopatra's death becomes an act of triumph over Caesar - the representative of patriarchal Rome. On finding her dead, one of his guards says, 'Caesar's beguile'. Through death Cleopatra not only transcends the world of oppression and fate, but embraces her death as a positive act rather than as an act of negation:
“My desolation does begin to make a better life
And it is great
To do that thing that ends all other deeds,
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change.” (V.ii.1-6)

Cleopatra combines feminine and masculine qualities through her death. With her resolution to take on the masculine quality of rationality and firmness and courage she wills, 'I have nothing of woman in me / Now from head to foot/ I am marble constant' (V.ii.267-68). She rejects her feminine qualities of water and the changeability of the moon and transforms herself into 'air and fire'. She embraces Antony's masculinity and the world of Rome by dying in 'the true Roman Fashion'. Yet through her death, Shakespeare depicts her as enacting the strength of womanhood by converting death into an image of both sensuality and motherhood. The pain of death is bitter-sweet and sensual 'as a lover's pinch,/ which hurts and is desired' (V.ii.426-27) and the asp, the vehicle of death is a 'baby at my breast,/That sucks the nurse asleep?' (V.ii.445-46). Through death she is reborn and even the stern patriarchal Caesar is forced to admit her bravery, and the undeniable nobility and royalty of the woman who 'Took her own way'. Through his representation of womanhood, especially in the character of Cleopatra, Shakespeare indeed does transcend the stereotypes of his own time.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth’s disruption to the political culture stems from her ambition, and this virulent ambition is made highly unnatural by her gender. When she reads Macbeth’s revelation of the witches’ predictions, she immediately assumes that only her insistence will lead Macbeth actively to pursue and acquire the desired kingly position of power and authority. She summons the absent Macbeth with chiding words:

“Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round.” (I.v.25-28)

Lady Macbeth claims an ability to wield the character of Macbeth to her purposes and goals. Tennenhouse describes her characterization in influential political terms: “At the outset of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth the very same elements which other Jacobean playwrights use to display the absolute power of the state. He shows
how these might be used subversively.” Certainly Lady Macbeth’s suggestions are subversive in that she leads her husband into murdering the rightful, current monarch in their home. With this ploy, she assumes the absolute power of the state by acting as if she were accountable to none and deserves no censure. She rises to the throne only by the virtue or vice of her husband’s ascension as king, and yet, her insistence provided the impetus for the power base. Thus, Lady Macbeth exemplifies a negative anode of female ambition and power within a Renaissance context.

In considering Lady Macbeth’s characterization, one must remember, first and foremost, that feminine desires for power were seen as unnatural. In fact, Shakespeare couches these desires in emasculating terms to give them increased gravity. Lady Macbeth repudiates her femininity for power:

“Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty!” (I.v.40-43)

When Lady Macbeth desires to be “unsexed,” her words reveal the assumed discordance between feminine nature and political ambition. By putting these desires in masculine or gender-neutral form, Lady Macbeth explicitly suggests their unnaturalness. Shakespeare’s language here induces tension and reflects the political gender tensions already existent in the Elizabethan world. Wallace MacCaffrey comments upon this disparity between femininity and political strength in his biography of Elizabeth I: “For a woman the demands made on the occupant of the throne were supremely difficult to meet, since the characteristic qualities which a monarch was expected to display were largely masculine.” While Lady Macbeth wishes to be “unsexed,” Elizabeth asserted the title King as frequently as Queen and sought to establish her own power by transcending the gender issue. Nonetheless, as Levin notes, not even Elizabeth could escape her femininity:

“Elizabeth might incorporate both male and female in her sovereignty, but her body was a very human female one and, hence to both Elizabeth herself and to her people, an imperfect one.” Just as Elizabeth had difficulty asserting political authority as a woman, and thus adopted male gender characteristics, Shakespeare de-feminizes Lady Macbeth
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to give her ambitions credibility. Such unnatural positioning created tension in the play and reflected anxiety in the Elizabethan world.

Shakespeare pushes Lady Macbeth’s oddity so far as to reverse Macbeth’s gender roles. In the play Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is considered nearly sinister in comparison with her husband, Macbeth, a perception that is supported by such assertions as from the lips of her character.

"How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
have to do this" (I.vii.55-59)

Indeed, Macbeth demonstrates considerably less determination than his wife. Macbeth's self-doubting statement of "Each corporal agent to this terrible feat/Away, and mock the time with fairest show/False face must hide what the false heart doth know:"

(1.vii.80-82)

As he is considering the grave deed he and Lady Macbeth have connived to commit, indicating his awareness of the negative consequences he is likely to suffer, even if unspecific.

As a result, Lady Macbeth scorns him for his weakness. In bloodying her hands in the death of the king, she chastises her husband: “My hands are of your colour; but I shame/To wear a heart so white.” (II.ii.63-64) Typically, weakness is associated with the female, and man gains integrity through strength and boldness in battle. But Macbeth loses his courage at the decisive moment and Lady Macbeth assumes his bloody obligation. Her husband’s weakness is not only shameful in Lady Macbeth’s eyes; his weakness is also as unnatural as her strength. Such a reversal carries with it significant social ramifications.

Tennenhouse comments upon the gender reversal and its political symbolism:

Most other Jacobean tragedies presuppose this same connection between sexual relations and the condition of the political body. In staging Macbeth, Shakespeare simply literalizes the homology which makes unruliness on the part of an aristocratic woman into an assault on the sovereign’s power. He allows Lady Macbeth to overrule her husband in order to show that such inversion of sexual relations is also
an inversion of the political order. Her possession of illicit desire in its most masculine form— the twisted ambition of the malcontent, leads directly to regicide.

Positioning woman over man has not just domestic but political connotations as well. Lady Macbeth’s dominion over Macbeth reflects the larger issue of female involvement in the political structure and a woman’s possible dominion as monarch over man as subject.

Lady Macbeth’s strength deteriorates as she falls into periods of lunacy and sleepwalking. Lady Macbeth postulates that “none can call our power to account,” (V.i.37) but apparently she mistakes the power of her own conscience. Her manic fixation with bloodied hands and her final act of suicide indicate a personal trial and conviction.

Critics, such as Sarah Siddon, have expressed pardon of Lady Macbeth's words and behavior by emphasizing that it is ambition that drives Lady Macbeth. Siddons believes that Lady Macbeth's mention of a nursing child in the midst of her dreadful language, persuades one unequivocally that she has really felt maternal yearning of a mother towards her babe. Siddons further points out that "it is only in soliloquy that she (Lady Macbeth) invokes the powers of hell to unsex her."

The critic M. Leigh-Noel, in her study of Lady Macbeth, offers further defense by considering Lady Macbeth's circumstance of socio-economic position and history, as well as on her own assertion that lady Macbeth had been a mother. Noel suggests that, in the age that Macbeth was written "human life was by no means as sacred as it is now; and that violence was the common resort of both mean and noble in their efforts to gain the desires of their souls." Noel places emphasis on Lady Macbeth being the "solitary inmate" of Macbeth's castle, believing she was "cheered only by occasional and fitful visits from her husband." Noel further suggests that Lady Macbeth had to "live only on the remembrance of the bittersweet joy of maternity, to wake up and miss the magnetic pressure of infant fingers" consequently causing Lady Macbeth to cling "more tenaciously to her husband." (Thompson & Roberts 174). Noel believes that these circumstances support the theory that Lady Macbeth paid "a terrible price . . . to gratify her husband's ambition." That while " Macbeth had the stronger wishes, she (Lady Macbeth) had the stronger will" (Thompson & Roberts 175) and since it is will that prevails over wishes, Lady Macbeth's share of the burden in her conspiracy with her husband outweighed that of Macbeth's.
Noel's arguments validly challenge many common perceptions of Lady Macbeth and rightfully points to isolation and suffering as likely contributors to Lady Macbeth's loss of mental capacity. But it is the shocking threat Lady Macbeth made regarding dashing the brains of her nursing child that the critic France Anne Kemble believes is "no mere figure of speech" continues to cast Lady Macbeth as a character who is much worse that her male counterpart.

The pattern of the male monarch as savior echoes through sixteenth-century England, so that the fears caused by female rule manifested themselves in a longing for the safety and tradition of the king. Shakespeare reflects this cultural anticipation through Lady Macbeth’s tragic fall from power. Gertrude is, more than any other character in the play, the antithesis of her son, Hamlet. Hamlet is a scholar and a philosopher, searching for life's most elusive answers. He cares nothing for this "mortal coil" and the vices to which man has become slave. Gertrude is shallow, and thinks only about her body and external pleasures. Like a child she longs to be delighted. We do not see much of her in daily activity, but if we could we would see a woman enraptured by trinkets and fine clothes, soft pillows and warm baths. Gertrude is also a very sexual being, and it is her sexuality that turns Hamlet so violently against her. The Ghost gives Hamlet, who is already disgusted with his mother for marrying his uncle within such a short time after his father's death, even more disturbing information about the Queen:

"Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,-
O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power
So to seduce!- won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen." (I.v.42-45)

Many critics misread the line "adulterate beast" as proof that Gertrude had been the lover of Claudius even before Hamlet's father had died. This would make the Queen a far more loathsome character than Shakespeare had intended, and the rest of the play makes no mention of this adultery. Adulterate, by definition, means to change to a worse state by mixing; to contaminate with base matter. And Claudius has indeed, according to the Ghost, contaminated his precious Gertrude, but this does not mean that Claudius did so before Hamlet's father died. If Gertrude were an adulteress, she would have been almost certainly been
involved in Claudius' plot of murder, and therefore she would be the play's villainess and not its child-like victim. Claudius would believe her to be an accomplice and confide in her, but he does not. Moreover, if it were true, it most surely would be foremost on Hamlet's mind, but when Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her closet and announces all her crimes, he does not once even imply that she has committed adultery. Olav Lokse points out in his book *Outrageous Fortune* about the Ghost's complaint that he was "Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch'd" (I.v.75), which is echoed by Claudius's "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen", in (III.iii.55), which may be taken to indicate the sequence in which the pre-play events had occurred.

That Gertrude has an aversion to the truth is not in dispute. She lies to herself about the consequences of her actions, and she lies to those around her. But she lies to protect. Hers are not cruel and wicked falsehoods; hers are white lies that she feels she must tell in order to keep her and those around her safe physically and emotionally. She must tell the King that Hamlet has killed Polonius, but, she does what she can to help Hamlet, telling Claudius that Hamlet "weeps for what is done" when clearly he does not.

On the surface it is hard to comprehend why Hamlet, his father, and Claudius all have such a deep devotion to Gertrude. But the qualities that save her from condemnation along with Claudius are subtly woven into the play. She loves Hamlet, and, underneath her shallow exterior, shows great emotion when he confronts her. Gertrude truly does not know what she has done to make Hamlet so furious, and it is only when he tells her that she understands her actions to be wrong:

> "O Hamlet, speak no more: Thou turn'st my very eyes into my soul,
> ...[...]...[...]
> these words like daggars enter my ears;
> No more, sweet Hamlet! (III.iv.88-96)

There is no reason to believe that Gertrude is lying to appease Hamlet in the above lines. Nowhere else in the play is Gertrude portrayed as cunning or Janus-faced, as is Claudius. Even though Hamlet lashes out at her with all the rage he can muster, Gertrude remains faithful to him, protecting him from the King. And, although her love for Claudius is wrong by moral standards, she is now his queen, and remains loyal to
him. We see she has the potential for great love -- she wants to protect Claudius from the mob, and she cares deeply about Ophelia and Polonius, and is concerned for Hamlet in the duel even though she has no idea that it is a trap. It is Gertrude's underlying propensity for goodness that redeems her. Her men forgive her for her shallow, sensual nature and her addictions to comfort and pleasure because they see that she is innocent of premeditation. It is sad but fitting that Gertrude meets her end drinking from the poisoned goblet, demanding that she tastes what is in the pretty cup, as trusting as a new-born babe.

Nonetheless, the anxieties manifested in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* suggest that women, perhaps even Elizabeth, cannot acceptably overcome the patriarchal system. The state of women in power is not the way things “ought to be.” Scholar James Emerson Phillips emphasizes how Shakespeare advocates a return to unquestionably patriarchal systems to restore harmony: “Although it claims its heroic victim, the evil power is in none of the great Shakespearean tragedies allowed to emerge triumphant at the end of the play. Claudius is killed and Fortinbras restores order to the kingdom of Denmark; Malcolm is restored to his rightful throne and civil peace returns to Scotland at the death of Macbeth.” Shakespeare’s resolutions do not suggest positive involvement of women within the political structure. In fact, the resolution comes with the ablation of women from the political realm.

Thus, Shakespeare’s drama reflects the Elizabethan world. Within the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, one sees potential conflicts arising from female ambition for sovereign power and corruption of the politic body through corruption of the female sovereign body. In both plays, Shakespeare mirrors anxiety from within the Elizabethan culture relating to the existence of and dependence upon a female monarch. Also, both plays end with the diminution of female sovereign authority and an apparent return to a state of normalcy within a more traditional, patriarchal framework. This return to patriarchy represents both Shakespeare’s political resolution and the Elizabethan cultural desire.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's Juliet is a headstrong and intelligent character in spite of her young age, though she often seems timid to the audience because of her young age. She is considered by many to be the true hero of the play, acting as a sounding board and a balance against the impulsive Romeo. It is Juliet who sets the boundaries of behavior in her relationship with Romeo. She allows him to kiss her,
she pledges her commitment before him, and it is she who suggests their marriage. Juliet's forgiveness of Romeo after he kills Tybalt indicates her mature nature in contrast to his passionate impulsiveness. Furthermore, Juliet lies and clandestinely subverts her family's wishes, a truly rebellious action against traditional Italian society.

When reading *King Lear*, we may ask ourselves: Are female characters stereotyped? Do we have to ascertain Cordelia as the representative of goodness and her sisters as evil women?

At the beginning of the play, Lear’s daughters behave in very different ways. King Lear wants to divide his kingdom in three parts. But to decide which part will correspond to each daughter he proposes a love-test. The better part will correspond to the daughter who tells him the most beloved for her. Gonerill and Regan flatter Lear by means of complex, long and exaggerated speeches:

“Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;
[…][…][…]
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love; (I.i.54-70)

In the same way, Cordelia’s turn of speaking in the love-test is characterized by its simplicity, sincerity and plainness: “I love your Majesty/According to my bond; nor more nor less.” (I.i.91-92)

According to feminist critics, Cordelia’s negative attitude to flatter Lear can be interpreted as an opposition to Lear’s authority. She does not want to be ruled by patriarchy. Her response is a passive one. Silence, the only possible way of subversion for upper-class women of the Middle Ages. However, when Cordelia reappears in the fourth act she is no longer a transgressor, but an obedient daughter to Lear. Cordelia’s plainness and sincerity is fully emphasised when she asserts the reason of her being cast away: “And such a tongue/As I am glad I have not, though not to have it/Hath lost me in your liking.” (I.i.230-32)

About Cordelia we should notice that she only appears at the beginning and at the end of the play but she is absent in the rest of the play. It is a clear example of the prototypical ‘Shakespearean woman’: absent, silent or dead. Cordelia is characterised by her silent and obedient
attitude; her sisters, on the other hand, have a full power of speech. This is seen as a ‘fault’. According to feminist critics this is explained in the sense that they are defying male authority. They will no longer be ruled by their father. Lear’s Fool will be the reporter to the audience of Lear’s being treated badly by his daughters: “The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,/That it had its head bit off by its young.” (I.iv.213-15)

Lear is puzzled. He has lost power over his kingdom and also over his daughters. He becomes a servant of his daughters, a man without a will. Lear is unable to accept this dependence and he gets mad, he cannot accept that he has lost his “male authority” over them. But Lear’s daughters have a cruel and evil side as the martyrdom inflicted on Gloucester demonstrates. In the seventh scene of the third act, Cornwall and Regan pluck out his eyes. Before the martyrdom, Gloucester will qualify the daughters as monsters, evil creatures:

“Because I would not see thy cruel nails/ Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister/ In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs.” (III.vii.55-57) Albany, Gonerill’s husband, will put it clear in his speech:

“Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform’d? A father, and a gracious aged man, Whose reverence the head-lugg’d bear would lick, Most barbarous, most degenerate! have you madded.” (IV.ii.40-43)

However, evil will not go unchecked any more, Albany foretells that something will stop the chaos going on, and if that does not happen somebody should stop it by destroying the monsters: ’Regan and Gonerill’

“If that the heavens do not their visible spirits Send quickly down to tame these vile offences, It will come, Humanity must perforce prey on itself, Like monsters of the deep.” (IV.ii.46-50)

Thus, according to Shakespeare’s text, Gonerill and Regan are clearly represented as demons, monsters, anything but human. They are responsible for the chaos going on and of the disruption of the state.
They are the enemies of the mankind and must be destroyed. Women at power can only bring disgrace, however a saviour will come. And that saviour will be a “sanctified woman”: Cordelia. For me, she is a redeeming woman, though for some critics like McLuskie, this is a restoration of patriarchy, but in my opinion Cordelia works as redemption of the feminine, she is a balance between her sisters.

In scene IV Cordelia reappears. She is in the French camp near Dover. She asks her soldiers to search for his father, whose daughters have turned him mad. Despite Lear’s attitude towards her, she does not show anger, hate or any other bad feeling for him, but forgiveness and love.

“No blown ambition doth our arms incite /But love, dear love, and our aged father’s right / Soon may I hear and see him!” (IV.v.27-29)

In her words Cordelia appears a pure, chaste, innocent woman, i.e., a saint or “sanctified woman.” In the seventh scene of the fourth act Cordelia and Lear are reunited and reconciled. Cordelia is again contrasted with her sisters:

“O my dear father! Restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips; and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made!” (IV.vii.26-29)

I agree with feminist critics like McLuskie in that Cordelia’s return is a restoration of patriarchy, of the old order. But this cannot be wholly reduced to male power. Cordelia has also power, she has a group of soldiers under her command. She is autonomous and does not need the King of France to command her soldiers. Cordelia’s sisters’ low passions will arrive at their limit in their clash for Edmund, as the following quotes demonstrate:

“My never shall endure her: dear my Lord, / Be not familiar with her.” – Regan.(V.i.15-16)

“I had rather lose the battle than that sister / Should loosen him and me.”- Goneril. (V.i.18-19)

The reader notices that these sisters met their end tragically. Their lust for Edmund destroys them. Thus, Cordelia’s return brings changes: evil is destroyed; however she has not found a better end. Cordelia is later strangled to death in the jail, and from that shock Lear breathes his last later. Albany and Edgar are horrified, Cordelia was the symbol of a new
future, but now a dark future appears before them. What is the place of women in *King Lear*? All of them die at the end. There is no distinction in that for demonised or sanctified women. Thus, we cannot claim that there is a complete division of women in the play.

According to some critics like Coppelia Kahn women are seen as a positive force. Thus Lear is redeemed by means of a loving non-patriarchal relationship with Cordelia. But McLuskie thinks this is only a restoration of patriarchy. In my opinion, though I agree with McLuskie in considering *King Lear* an anti-feminine play, I do not think that Cordelia’s function is a restoration of the “old order.” She is a balance against her sisters.

Shakespeare realizes that throughout the history of mankind, women have always been at a disadvantageous position socially, economically and politically. Through strong female characters, Shakespeare has delineated gender issues. He has given a comprehensive view of life with equal emphasis on both male and female characters. His female characters show the social stigmas they have undergone during that time. He has portrayed his personal admiration for intelligent, strong women, using virtues and strength he gives his female characters. So we can say that Shakespeare should be considered one of the pioneers of feminist movement. Actually, through representation of women characters in the tragedies, he wants the elimination of gender discrimination and advocates the true liberation of women in society.

References


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