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The Women of William Shakespeare's Tragedies

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ABSTRACT

Women did not appear on the stage in England until the seventeenth century. The roles of women in William Shakespeare's plays were often played by young boys. However, Shakespeare wrote quite powerful roles for the women in his plays. He tended to make male characters the primary protagonists but the female characters held dominant supporting roles. Shakespeare cleverly made the women a more authoritative figure than the men. His tragic women have a beauty and an appeal all their own. They may be as much creatures of circumstances as his tragic heroes, but they have qualities of character which make them glow forth with an added poignancy a special dignity. Shakespeare's sensitiveness to feminine charm and his power to discriminate its distinguishing quality are the chief means by which he makes his tragic women live. They are vibrant with a vitality all their own. The peculiar quality of each character exhales from her every word and action like the fragrance of a flower. This paper attempts to study the treatment of women characters in William Shakespeare's tragedy drama.

KEYWORDS: Protagonists, discriminate, fragrance, persistent mourning, meekness, portrays.

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RATIONALE

Four Shakespeare's tragedies with some of literature's most recognized females are Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear and Othello. These women are portrayed as wives, mothers, daughters and the beloveds of kings, princes and generals.

IN MACBETH

Lady Macbeth is the wife of a General whom she advises and assists in killing the king so that her husband will obtain the throne. She has her ambitious, and instigates her husband into the act of crime. But for her reproaches and her challenging Macbeth's love, Macbeth might not have launched into crime, makes up her mind as to the course of action to be followed. She knows her better than Macbeth that the way to the throne lies through murder, and she will have to take the initiative in the matter. Lady Macbeth undertakes a task which is more than a woman can accomplish. She prays to the powers of evil that she may be unsexed. For the moment she is carried away by her impulse and as she proposes to do with the "Valour" of her tongue.

The beauty of Lady Macbeth's cunningness is that she seems to have no fear. She never doubts that her tactics will be successful. She also strips herself of all feminine qualities to obtain this level of confidence. She asks spirits to "unsex" her, so she will no longer possess any feminine qualities such as remorse and peace. She sees these female characteristics as negative and weak. That is why she calls Macbeth womanly when he says he will refuse to kill Duncan. Lady Macbeth is a study in wickedness but she is wicked with a difference. In her character is combined wickedness and womanliness in almost equal proportions. She is less cruel, vicious and less violent than Euripides' Medea. She is not way an idealist like, Sophocles' Antigone but, like her, is single-minded. She is no better than a kind of ogress and she is merely detested.¹ Lady Macbeth is certainly more resourceful than her husband. It is she who takes the initiative plans the murder of Duncan, and even partly assists Macbeth in carrying out the plot. After the act of murder, Macbeth loses all control over himself, and is tormented by imaginative terrors. It is Lady Macbeth than who comes to his help.

"Why Worthy Thane,
You do unbend your noble strength to think
So brain-sickly of things. Get some water.
And wash this filthy witness from your hand"

Lady Macbeth is a realist, and takes the most practical view of things. She carries away the daggers that Macbeth has brought with himself after murdering Duncan. Her husband Shudder to go back to the death chamber again to deposit the daggers. Lady Macbeth cries:

“Give me the daggers; the sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures; ‘tis the eye of childhood
The fears as painted devil. If he do bleed,
I’ll glad the faces of the grooms withal;
It must seem their guilt.”

So Lady Macbeth goes back to the death-chamber to put the daggers there. In the meantime, her husband is perturbed by a knocking within. She soon rejoins him and drags him to their bed-chamber (22.65) Macbeth seems to be so much unbalanced that he would have easily betrayed himself to Macduff and Lennox when they called in the morning. At the critical moment she is always by the side of her husband.²

IN HAMLET

Gertrude and Ophelia are the two women who love of the main character. One is Hamlet’s mother and the later is someone he wishes to take for a wife. Gertrude is a character who does not have a massive speaking part, but her character is quite substantial. She has more power and influence over Hamlet than both are willing to admit. She is very dull and very shallow. She loves happiness and does not mourn her husband’s death for a long period like a peasant woman. She misses her husband but doesn’t display it. She gets remarried within two months of her widowhood. She asks Hamlet not to offend his offer like stepfather by his persistent mourning which is an unmanly sign of weakness. She doesn’t feel the least ashamed in her overhasty remarried. She rather wishes that Hamlet should marry Ophelia and enjoy himself like her. It gives her pleasure to sit on the throne and see smiling faces around her. She wishes the people to be happy in a good humoured sensual fashion.

Gertrude is a faculty character. She feels genuine remarks when Hamlet rebukes her in dagger like words. |O God| A beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer. Her hasty marriage with a villain and wily fellow marks Hamlet generalize “Frailty, thy name is woman”.³ Gertrude asks to see Hamlet after the play to discuss the present situation and his recent madness. Hamlet is immediately rude to his mother and confesses that he is unhappy with her marriage. Gertrude does not want to hear it; she knows not how to deal with her own son. He says that he wants her to take a deep look into herself “you go not till set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.22-23). She becomes fearful of the truth. “O Hamlet, speak no more / Thou turn’s mine eyes into my very soul. And where I see such black and grained spots.... (3.4.99-101). She sees what is within herself and it is horrible. Gertrude is typical for a woman/wife of this time. She obeys her husband and is not permitted to take her own thoughts or emotions”.⁴

The Queen Gertrude was not a bad hearted woman, not at all the woman think little of the murder. But she had a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun, and, to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy, like more sheep in the sun. She never saw that drunkenness is disgusting till Hamlet told her so, and, though she knew that he considered her marriage “O” erhasty. She was untroubled by any shame at the fillings which had led to it.⁵ Ophelia typifies meekness but, in her case, meekness often verges on weakness. She is as fragile as she is passive and she is simply engulfed in the torrential waves of tragedy. Meek, gentle, and submissive as she is, her very virtues have an air of passivity about them. In the words of George Brandes, “She is soft yielding creature, with no power of resistance, a loving soul but without the passive which gives strength.”⁶ Frailty thy name is woman!, exclaims Hamlet, mainly with Gertrude in mind. Ophelia does not share the moral lapse of Gertrude, but she is too frail for the world of harsh reality. Ophelia is plainly quite young and inexperienced. She has lost her mother and has only a father and a brother affectionate but worldly, to take care of her. Everyone in the drama who has any heart is drawn to her. It is precisely because she is weak character that Pathos is more appropriate in her case than the element of grandeur.⁷

IN KING LEAR

Cordelia is the only one who has not taken a husband. Shakespeare even portrays her in a separate way, her name is much more melodic and feminine than her sisters and she speaks in rhyming couplets. She also has true love in her heart for her father so much love that she cannot express it. Although Lear knows this as well, his ego has been damaged in front of his court, so he banishes his daughter. In Act 1 Scene 1, 94-95 Cordelia has defined her relation to her father as a bond.

I love you Majesty

According to my bond; no more no less.

Her statement has a richness that dominates memory. On the other hand it is simple plain proposition that has the ring of truth and common sense, standing out with its “no more no less” against the all or nothing absolutes of the first scene. But it also resists and teases our understanding; it is a line that the rest of the play must make clear. “Bond” whether in its legal or material sense is a word of double significance; a bond brings things together but it sets up limits too. At the moment, Cordelia makes her pronouncement, bond seem to start breaking all over the stage. Lear curses his daughter and Kent’s voice is heard calling his king mad and blind. It is Cordelia’s suggestion that people are held together by bonds which are necessarily not limitless that starts Lear on the course that eventually leads him to call on nature to destroy all bonds. But Cordelia’s love if it is less than

all is more than nothing. Under the extreme pressures of reduction, Lear explores the “needs” of humanity, the bond that the art of our necessities throws into sharp relief.⁸

Goneril and Regan are wicked and their morality is over-hidden, trampled, their cruelty has no limits. They develop the Godly feeling about them, considering that they are allowed to encroach upon the obligation towards their father, that a kingdom can be ruled according to their own wish without any sense of responsibility. After becoming powerful, their character becomes primitive selfish. With all the residing in this play, Cordelia is the epitome of goodness. She loves, virtuous and forgiving. She also demonstrates law and order in that she is a devoted daughter and has great respect for their father and his position. Cordelia though is a tragic character for her kindness and her staying on the boundaries of the social norms of the Elizabethan age ironically turned out to be her tragic downfall. Cordelia is the very embodiment of this ‘fortitude of soul’ which has something heavenly about it. It is but natural that her father would hail her as ‘a soul in bliss’ when he himself felt that he was bound ‘upon a wheel of fire’. It is her smile of love that made life worth living for Lear, even in that moment of unbearable agony. Goneril and Regan can be assumed to be unbiased. It is to note that their comment on the first scene makes no mention of the old man’s being mad, nor of the partition a trick. Concerning Cordelia they preserved complete silence. Neither her pride, sullenness, obstinacy, nor lack of human judgment; he is rash at the best of times, now choleric working more freely on the infirm spirits of extreme age, he is more than even instable. Cordelia is his favourite daughter. Her virtues join with her father’s faults and her sister’s wickedness to make her ‘nothing both inevitable and right’. Cordelia is a compelling picture of a young girls – as compelling in her way as Chaucer’s Griselda is and similar in conception.⁹

Regan endorses the view that Lear has always been self-willed, obstinate and arbitrary. Goneril sums up, ‘The best and soundest of his time had been but rash’ and she suggests that they must be prepared for an ‘unruly waywardness that in-firm and choleric years bring with them’. Goneril equates Lear’s old age with dotage and the two sisters are united in their efforts to check the authoritarian attitude of Lear. In a way Goneril and Regan are supposed to be ‘the instruments of Fate in the education of a man who has reached old age without achieving the wisdom and humility that maturity and experienced should bring. Lear’s judgment has always been poor but he is a titan in passion, King Lear is presenting this conflict between youth and crabbed age is as much a tragedy of old age of ungrateful children.¹⁰

IN OTHELLO

Desdemona is the loveliest and adorable form, simple and innocent as a child and radiant with heavenly purity of heart. She is the daughter of a noble family, of lofty culture and divine

beauty. She is an idealist. She is heedless of custom or convention and lies the root of the tragedy that is enacted in the play. The character of Desdemona is sublime in its gracefulness, modesty, purity, tenderness and gentleness. She is described as a maid, tender, fair and happy. Her engrossing interest in the life history of Othello's colourful personality reveals in her nature a romantic strain probably unknown to her father. She even wished heaven had made her such a man. Her love for Othello is not inspired by passion, but is kind led by romantic imagination and a spirit of hero worship. Her inner arduous of passion, pity and hero worship have not been evoked; the coming of Othello evokes them. Her love is "a magnificent gesture of romantic idealism". But there appeared suddenly in her a strange freedom and boldness of action. She takes her fate boldly into her own hands, astonishes, by a midnight elopement, those who knew her a mere "still and quiet girl".¹¹ Desdemona as a creature of excessive will or sexual appetite who had unnaturally chosen a man not to her own completion or skin colour. Like a tragic version of the jealous husband Master Ford in the Merry wives of Windsor, Othello begins to doubt his wife's chastity and also his own worth wondering aloud whether his blackness, his age and his lack of Venetian manners make him unattractive. Desdemona represented as an icon of purity and martyred virtue and an Othello who becomes ever more irrational and cruel. Race and gender are set, horrifyingly, at odds and from a feminist perspective even the vindication of Desdemona is deeply problematic in that Desdemona is also, in the second half of the play, increasingly stripped of agency. No longer the initiator of action she patiently endures Othello's wrath, even when he strikes her in public. In one particularly scene, she talks with her waiting woman, Emilia as she prepares for bed. Entertaining thoughts of her own death, Desdemona express them by singing an old song about the woman abandoned by her lover. Through the line "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve" (4.3.50), Desdemona seems to express her own acceptance of Othello's cruelty to her. Later, after Othello has strangled Desdemona, she momentarily revives, declaring herself guiltless of any crime but also assuming responsibility for her own murder. When Emilia asks who has killed her, Desdemona respond: "Nobody I myself, Farewell" (5.2.133) a astute judge of the relative value of things. She would not be reduced for the small items of clothing or the trinkets young men uses as gifts for their girl friends but the whole world is a different matter. Emilia goes on to declare that women have appetites and affections just as men do and that if men mistreat women, women will learn from the men how to satisfy themselves outside of marriage.¹² Desdemona undergoes as drastic an alteration of behavior as did Othello before his course was set. As Desdemona becomes aware that she has somehow estranged Othello's love, she strives to regain it by conforming to his image of submissive

obedience. This image is however, so alien to her that she immediately reverts to her earlier pattern of personal assertions overriding his discomfort even to the point of openly criticizing him.

Another female character of Othello is Emilia. She is a common, vulgar woman and a foil to Desdemona. She is sharp-tongued and frank in her expression of the moral wickedness of man and woman. She is devoted to her husband in a blind and unquestioning way. She has no idea of Iago's wicked thoughts and plans. In perfect innocence she secures for him Desdemona's handkerchief. She thought that she was only gratifying her husband's whim. Her faith in her husband's innocence and honesty continued all through shows obvious distress at the loss of the handkerchief is a grievous matter to what she considered to be a trifling matter. When in the last scene Othello tells her it was her husband who told him of Cassio's intrigue with Desdemona she thrice repeated her cry of wonder and disbelief "My husband?" Her valiantly only proves that she is blunt sort of woman and not very intelligent. Stupidity is her fault and depravity.

CONCLUSION

The women of Shakespeare's tragedies deal with the problems and obstacles that they faced. Lady Macbeth leads the crime for killing the king Duncan for the love of her husband Macbeth. She braces herself up to the task of fulfilling her husband's ambition. She carries away the daggers that Macbeth has brought with himself after murdering Duncan. Her unnaturally strained conscience and power of dissimulation avenge themselves during sleep and it were the secret and guilty scenes. She ends her life with suicide. Gertrude has no control over situations and events and carried away with the current without taking any positive action. She doesn't agree with Polonius that Hamlet's madness is caused by his failure in love. On the other hand, Ophelia serves as a 'decoy' to settle the issue of Hamlet's madness. She continues to be sweet and lovable even in her madness which is never dreadful and shocking. Cordelia met her father with unfilial forwardness and answered his, no doubt, foolish questions with becoming harshness and asperity. She expresses deep concern when she hears of the treatment of her father. Goneril and Regan are strong willed and cunning and resemble Lady Macbeth and Goneril does not love people, she loves only power. Desdemona's engrossing interest in the life history of Othello's colourful personality reveals in her nature a romantic strain probably unknown to her father.

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