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Shakespeare's representation of women

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's plays, women play a central role in moving the plot forward. These women become catalysts for the drama that unfolds, especially in Shakespeare's tragedies, where the reactions of the other characters depend on the actions of the women. Desdemona from *Othello* and Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* play this role in their respective plays. Both women play similar roles even though their personalities are vastly different. Desdemona becomes an almost stereotypical woman once she marries Othello. This new personality affects her negatively because it ultimately leads to her demise. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, blurs gender lines by acting similar to a man for personal gain. But, like Desdemona, her personality leads to her death. Shakespeare uses Desdemona and Lady Macbeth as important plot devices and to experiment with gender roles. His female characters then become subtle critics on Elizabethan society's traditions and views of women.

Keywords: Women, Shakespeare's, plays, female, representation, characters, traditional, gender, roles, woman

Introductions

The majority of Shakespeare's major female characters are young and involved in romantic plots that revolve around choosing a husband. The conflict between a father and daughter regarding who represents an ideal suitor had the potential to create serious quarrels in families, and Shakespeare repeatedly stages such quarrels in his writing. Two of Shakespeare's tragedies begin with the struggle of a young female character to free herself from male control. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet sneaks out of her home to marry Romeo, and then fakes her own death to escape the husband her father has chosen for her.

In *Othello*, Desdemona also sneaks out at night to marry the man she has chosen against her father's wishes. Although these heroines free themselves from their fathers, they do not free themselves from male control altogether. Juliet loses her chosen husband when he is drawn into the ongoing feud between the men of the Capulet and Montague families. Desdemona remains faithful to Othello, but her history of defying male authority makes him anxious. He comes to suspect her of adultery and ultimately murders her.

Whereas Shakespeare's tragedies usually feature women in secondary roles, or roles that share top billing with a man (like Juliet or Cleopatra), Shakespeare's comedies often feature women as main characters. *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night* all centre on young women determined to choose their own husbands or, like Olivia in *Twelfth Night* and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, determined not to marry at all. Like the tragedies, these plays show that the apparent ability to choose a husband or to avoid marriage does not amount to much freedom after all. In the end, both Olivia and Beatrice are persuaded to marry. Likewise, both Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night* don disguises and enjoy comic adventures that come to an end once they take off their costumes, get married, and begin new lives in their roles as wives. *The Merchant of Venice* offers a slightly more empowering ending. In that play Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men and test their new husbands by tricking them into giving up their wedding rings, a symbolic gesture which suggests both women intend to exercise power within their marriages.

Women dress up as men in many of Shakespeare's plays, often as a dramatic device to further the plot. By making his female characters cross-dress, Shakespeare gave himself the opportunity to put them in situations from which real-life women would have been barred. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Viola disguises herself as the young man "Cesario" and offers to help Duke Orsino woo Countess Olivia, something a noblewoman would never have been allowed to do.

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Elizabethans largely believed that women lacked the intelligence, rationality, courage, and other qualities necessary to perform roles reserved for men. However, whenever Shakespeare's cross-dressing women take on traditionally male roles, they usually do a better job than their male counterparts. In *The Merchant of Venice*, none of the male characters can think of a way to rescue Antonio from a contract that allows the moneylender Shylock to take "a pound of flesh" from his body. But when Portia arrives in court disguised as a lawyer, she demonstrates a legal savvy that no other male character possesses. Portia brilliantly points out that Shylock may be legally entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, but that "no jot of blood" can be spilled in the process.

Although shrewd young women appear frequently in Shakespeare's plays, mature women are conspicuously absent. Mothers in particular are missing. In *The Tempest*, Prospero lives alone with his daughter Miranda as castaways on a remote island. When Prospero gives an account of their escape from Milan, he only references her mother once, and only in order to confirm that Miranda is indeed his daughter: "Thy mother was a piece of virtue / and she said thou wast my daughter" (I.ii.). Mothers are missing in plays from across Shakespeare's career, from *Titus Andronicus* to *King Lear*, and like *The Tempest*, many of these plays focus intensely on the relationships between fathers and daughters. Two notable exceptions to the rule of missing mothers include Gertrude in *Hamlet* and Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, both of whom have difficult relationships with their adult sons. The example of Gertrude also points to Shakespeare's tendency to present mature women as being devious, even dangerous. Hamlet believes his mother to be complicit with the king's assassination. Lady Macbeth provides another example of a devious older woman. Cleopatra may offer the only example of a powerful, mature woman whom Shakespeare portrays as being noble and dignified.

Five astonishing facts about women in Shakespeare

What would *Macbeth* be without Lady Macbeth? Or *Romeo and Juliet* with only Romeo? Yet there's an enormous disparity between female and male representation in Shakespeare's play. Few, great female characters deliver as many lines or impressive speeches as their male counterparts. While this may not be surprising considering 16th century society and theater, data can reveal a wider disparity than previously thought. As cinematics and filmomics examine the gender gap in cinema through screen time, Shakespeare scholars have counted lines and roles to better understand gender on Shakespeare's stage.

Female characters have less than half the amount of lines compared to male characters. Rosalind, from *As You Like It*, is the largest female role in all of Shakespeare's plays, yet only speaks 721 lines. Hamlet, the largest male role, speaks a total of 1,506 lines.

The women with the most speeches also have less than half as many as their male counterparts. Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*) and Rosalind (*As You Like It*) deliver 204 and 201 speeches respectively, the most out of all female Shakespeare characters. The male characters with the most speeches are Falstaff (*Henry IV, Part 1, Henry IV, Part 2*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) and Richard III (*Henry VI, Part 3* and *Richard III*), with 471 and 409 speeches respectively.

There are seven times as many roles for men as there are for women in Shakespeare's plays. Of the total 981 characters, 826 are men while only 155 are women; that means that women account for less than 16% of all Shakespearean characters.

Even fewer women actually performed on stage since most female roles were portrayed by men until the mid-seventeenth century. The first professional female actress recorded on the English stage, Margaret Hughes (c. 1630-1719), initially performed as Desdemona in *Othello* on 8 December 1660. Alternately, the last notable actor who performed female roles on stage was Edward Kynaston (1640-1712), who later gained popularity in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

Nearly 40% of the lines in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* are spoken by women, an impressively high percentage of female lines compared to his other plays. *Romeo and Juliet*, despite being about a tragic love story between a man and a woman, is only 31% female lines. *Timon of Athens* has the least amount of female lines in all of Shakespeare's plays, amounting to a minuscule 0.67%.

Woman in Shakespeare's play hamlet

Shakespeare has a fascinating style of presenting female characters; a lot of them are rebels and unruly. However not all female characters in Shakespeare's plays are rebellious, they are also very docile, eager-to-please young woman – classic Good Girls so to speak.

Their families, especially their fathers, regard them as ideal children that reflect well on their families and would never threaten their authority. The daughters make themselves presentable, agreeable and they accept the suitor chosen by their fathers. The fathers are always convinced that they know what is best for their daughters and have no concerns to impose their wills. The amenable daughters, opposed to their rebellious counterparts, do not question their fathers' decisions and obey to the consequences. Just like for that period, it seems to be Shakespeare's ideal feminine representation.

In his Tragedies young woman, like Ophelia in *Hamlet*, suffer from isolation, abuse and death. In particular, all female characters seem to have the same tragic fate, which is the unnatural, early death (Hamilton, 2003, pp. 69-70) ^[12].

Ophelia seems to be the ideal representation of Elizabethan daughterhood. In *Hamlet*, women are reflected as the subordinate position in Elizabethan England, where their lives are strictly controlled by either their fathers or husbands. Their rights are legally, socially and economically restricted. The female characters in *Hamlet*, Ophelia and Queen Gertrude, have only little or no power or autonomy (Gibson, 2002, p.72) ^[13]. In this part the focus will lie on *Hamlet's* female character Ophelia; Polonius's daughter, Laertes's sister, and *Hamlet's* sometimes love. Ophelia is a sweet, innocent woman, who obeys to both Polonius and Laertes. She is a smart young and loving woman that is overtaken by dramatic fate, madness and death (Berensmeyer, 2007, p. 38) ^[14].

Critics have determined that it is barely possible to reconstruct Ophelia's biography from Shakespeare's text; Ophelia appears in five of the play's twenty scenes and the pre-play of her love with *Hamlet* is only displayed through a few ambiguous flashbacks.

Despite a few differences, these two main influences manifested in similar legal and social expectations for

women of the time and enforced a strict binary between men and women. When a woman of this period transgressed gender boundaries and dressed in men's clothing in public, it associated her with the same social stigma that faced female actors, except that she was subject to arrest and imprisonment. One such woman was named Mary Frith, who was nicknamed Moll Cutpurse. Mary regularly went out in public dressed in men's clothing and was associated with London's criminal underground. She was also the subject of the 17th century play *The Roaring Girl*. Such behaviour was understood as a threat to gender hierarchies of the time, and any woman apprehended "cross-dressing" was understood to be in rebellion against her betters, i.e., men. Any man caught in similar circumstances was also punished, as dressing in women's clothing was understood as a perversion of masculinity and a sign of moral and sexual degeneration.

The Merchant of Venice, comedy in five acts by William Shakespeare, written about 1596-97 and printed in a quarto edition in 1600 from an authorial manuscript or copy of one. Bassanio, a noble but penniless Venetian, asks his wealthy merchant friend Antonio for a loan so that Bassanio can undertake a journey to woo the heiress Portia. Antonio, whose money is invested in foreign ventures, borrows the sum from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, on the condition that, if the loan cannot be repaid in time, Antonio will forfeit a pound of flesh. Antonio is reluctant to do business with Shylock, whom he despises for lending money at interest (unlike Antonio himself, who provides the money for Bassanio without any such financial obligation); Antonio considers that lending at interest violates the very spirit of Christianity. Nevertheless, he needs help in order to be able to assist Bassanio. Meanwhile, Bassanio has met the terms of Portia's father's will by selecting from three caskets the one that contains her portrait, and he and Portia marry. (Two previous wooers, the princes of Morocco and Aragon, have failed the casket test by choosing what many men desire or what the chooser thinks he deserves; Bassanio knows that he must paradoxically "give and hazard all he hath" to win the lady.) News arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost at sea. Unable to collect on his loan, Shylock attempts to use justice to enforce a terrible, murderous revenge on Antonio: he demands his pound of flesh. Part of Shylock's desire for vengeance is motivated by the way in which the Christians of the play have banded together to enable his daughter Jessica to elope from his house, taking with her a substantial portion of his wealth, in order to become the bride of the Christian Lorenzo. Shylock's revengeful plan is foiled by Portia, disguised as a lawyer, who turns the tables on Shylock by a legal quibble: he must take flesh only, and Shylock must die if any blood is spilled. Thus, the contract is canceled, and Shylock is ordered to give half of his estate to Antonio, who agrees not to take the money if Shylock converts to Christianity and restores his disinherited daughter to his will. Shylock has little choice but to agree. The play ends with the news that, in fact, some of Antonio's ships have arrived safely.

During Shakespeare's time, theatres were experiencing social and legal pressure from the growing conservative Puritanism of the era. Tracts against the theatre often pointed to the moral and spiritual danger present in contemporary theatrical practices, including the portrayal of women by young men. These tracts also pointed to the danger in the act of public commercial theatre in general,

especially because it destabilized gender expectations for women. The theatre was a commercial interest where women were, in Puritan imagination, at risk of overthrowing their rightful masters by exercising economic and social independence. These Puritan interests succeeded in shuttering the theatres for a period between 1642 and 1660, during the political turmoil of the English Civil Wars and Restoration. Even after 1661, with the rule of King Charles II, when women were legally allowed to act professionally, the negative social stigma of acting and the attending gender expectations were still in effect. As time passed and women of all races fought and agitated for expanded rights and privileges both in England and its colonies, and then later in what is now known as the United States, gender roles and expectations continued to change. In addition to the law, these changes were reflected (and sometimes caused by) evolutions in style, business, education and art. As women continued to be involved in theatre, gender play of a different sort emerged.

Conclusion

Women in Shakespeare is a topic within the especially general discussion of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic works. Main characters such as Dark Lady of the sonnets have elicited a substantial amount of criticism, which received added impetus during the second-wave feminism of the 1960s. A considerable number of book-length studies and academic articles investigate the topic, and several moons of Uranus are named after women in Shakespeare.

In his time, William Shakespeare seems to have been raising questions about standard images of men and women, what characteristics are distinctive of each sex, what is defined masculine and feminine, how each sex has qualities and behaviours that are both masculine and feminine, about the nature and powers of the patriarchal hegemony, and the roles that women and men are supposed to play in acting out their lives. During Shakespeare's time, and during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, English ideas of sexuality and gender, women's legal rights, and social expectations about womanhood played significant roles in how the theatre was performed, in the stories that were told, and in whom they were told.

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