

## Shakespeare's Shrews: Contemporary ideas from the feminist perspective

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### Abstract

The women characters of Shakespeare can be said to be a microcosm of all the women. Shakespeare's portrayal of women and the various roles that women play in his comedies and tragedies is one of the most interesting and extensively studied topics in the field of Shakespearean studies. The Bard has created some very inspiring and powerful female characters in his plays. Do all these characters show a consistency in their strong presence? What are the reasons for their conflicts with the societal norms prescribed for their gender? How do they negotiate their desire of power and authority and the gender expectations put forth by the society? These are the probing questions that this paper seeks to answer.

**Keywords:** shakespeare and women, the feminine in shakespeare's plays, female complexity in shakespeare

### Introduction

"From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:  
 They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;  
 They are the books, the arts, the academes,  
 That show, contain and nourish all the world."

*Love's Labour Lost* (4.3.1646-1650)

Shakespeare's portrayal of women and the various roles that women play in his comedies and tragedies is one of the most extensively studied topics in the field of Shakespearean studies. The feminine world of Shakespearean drama is full of uniqueness, charm, deep influence and furtive existence. His women characters have been celebrated all these ages in the history of literature. Compared to other writers of his time, Shakespeare introduced extraordinary and profound female characters in his plays. As seen through the works of many literary and historical scholars, women did not enjoy political, economic, or social equality with men during Shakespeare's time. Given the fact that in Shakespeare's time, men played the major part in society, held exclusive official posts of authority and power, and possessed the agency to directly influence the outcome of events, (Harmonsworth 200) Shakespeare's portrayal of his women characters show us that his views and sensibilities were ahead of his times.

A very interesting trend can be noticed in many of Shakespeare's plays; many female characters exercise a great deal of subtle forms of power and influence and at many times in subversive ways they challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. In fact, there are opinions that Shakespeare himself might not have been "aware of the dissonances he create[d]" (Lindheim) but as contemporary readers it is very noticeable. Many of Shakespeare's female characters are the most complex of his characters and the main motivators of the actions though the male characters generally fail to notice or refuse to acknowledge women's authority and influence openly, they are affected by it, often significantly. Hence, it is not surprising that scholars through the ages have tried to understand the complexities of Shakespearean women which are never evident at the first glance but unveil themselves as the

play progresses and at times are never wholly resolved.

This paper is an attempt to probe into and analyse some of the most prominent of Shakespeare's women characters and attempt an understanding of their behaviour in terms of gender conformity in society, masculine and feminine qualities and negotiations and subversion of gender roles by these women characters.

The first inquisition into these questions can be made by looking at the character of Lady Macbeth, one of the most powerful characters that Shakespeare created. The female presence in Macbeth is the combined characters of the witches and Lady Macbeth. This female presence takes the role of the catalyst in shaping his career in crime and the events in the play. A study of these female characters will show their androgynous nature and constant negotiations with gender roles. The main focus though, would be on the threat of the female power and how it influences the male characters.

*Macbeth* opens with the witches or the Weird Sisters. At the very onset, they declare: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Muir 4). This brings in the note of moral as well as physiological ambiguity. They are women, but sport beards. As Banquo says, "you should be women, / and yet your beards forbid me to interpret / that you are so" (Muir 15). The character of Duncan specially his gender can also be interpreted interestingly as androgynous as he combines in himself the attributes of both the father and the mother. He is the noble and benign source of nurturance which is starkly contrasted with the poisonous cauldron of the witches or the gall filled breasts of Lady Macbeth. However, this womanly softness costs him his authority on his country. Under his rule, Scotland witnesses a series of rebellions and witches are abroad in his kingdom. Hence, Duncan fails to maintain a protective masculine authority. In fact, his death is due to his womanly softness.

Now if Lady Macbeth is put under close scrutiny, female malevolence can be seen at its worst, She tries to 'unsex' herself, transform and harden herself to achieve her aims. In her attempt to unsex herself, she actually stifles the maternal functions of her body. In the famous soliloquy she says:

Come, you spirits /  
 That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
 And fill me, from crown to the toe, top-full  
 Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,  
 Stop up th'access and passage to remorse  
 That no compunctious visitings of nature  
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
 Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts  
 And take my milk for gall [...] (Muir 29-30).

More importantly, while goading Macbeth to murder Duncan, she makes terrible claims that are disturbing to most audiences and go against every notion of the feminine

I have given suck, and know  
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
 Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn  
 As you have done to this (Muir 42).

The most relevant question here remains as to what position such a powerful female character reaches during the course of the play. The answer sadly is that the plot depends on the exclusion of all female characters. Though they are initially very powerful, they gradually disappear from the play. Lady Macbeth, who was very strong at the beginning of the play and was the primary source of motivation for the crime through her constant badgering of Macbeth, emerges eventually as only the helpless wife. She turns into a troubled soul that sleep walks through her last days, utterly broken by the terrible nature of her actions and her husband's neglect. She commits suicide off-stage and is mourned only by her women. Macbeth seems to be without any concern for her when he says: "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word" (Muir 152-153). Similarly, the witches too disappear. Even when he meets them to know more about his future, he wants to hear prophecies from their masters. Macbeth never again mentions the witches.

The play thus ends in a completely male dominated manner with the complete exclusion of males as opposed to the beginning wherein the female presence was powerful and malevolent and male characters vulnerable.

A slightly different perspective of looking at Lady Macbeth would be as follows: Lady Macbeth enjoys complete security and displays extra ordinary confidence in the beginning of the play but is a victim of her own conscience in the latter part. She convinces, goads and does everything in her power to Macbeth to make 'the prophecy' come true and take every necessary action for it. But when she commits a crime, to prove her own wish, she loses her mind, the façade ends and she breaks down as a person. Why? Keeping in mind the historical context and the inferior social status attributed to women, it can be argued that her need of authority and esteem is so powerful that it out passes all her virtues and encourages her to commit sin. Freud links her cruelty with her subconscious guilt of childlessness. He says that she wants recognition in other ways when her 'womanly' existence fails to confer upon her the conventional 'completeness' of a woman.

Katherina of *Taming of the Shrew* is another example of an aggressive woman. She enjoys abusing people with her harsh words. She is portrayed as a woman with 'unwomanly'

behaviour. Her family sees it highly impossible for her to get married as she hates men. She does not leave any opportunity to criticise people. Yet she surrenders to her husband easily after her marriage.

Katherina is unhappy about several things; she feels jealous as her father treats her sisters better than her, she is not given any importance at home and in society as she does not possess the conventional role of a married woman, she gets the constant criticism that she can never win heart of a man. Due to this, she hates men and even physically attacks people out of her desire of love and belongingness. It can be argued that her needs of safety and belongingness are so dire that she cannot see life beyond that. Petrucio mentions in his first conversation with Katherina that he is "her equal in intelligence and intellectuality...." How is the Shrew tamed? She obviously finds a welcome change from her homely stress and accepts to be in the relation. As dictated in every patriarchal society, a woman is accepted by the society only when she is married and bears children of her man. This can be the major driving force behind her transformation into a subdued woman. She perhaps, wishes to be accepted. It also can mean that perhaps the character of Katherina is in search of the respect which she very well knows would come from matrimonial status. Hence, she even accepts Petrucio's dominance and rudeness. She finds satisfaction when socially she is accepted and respected at the end of the play where she guides other women to be loyal and dutiful towards their men.

Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, are yet other two female characters who are affected by the restrictions of the dominant social norms. Olivia exercises her power as the lady of the house and compels a servant to lie on her behalf to bide time and choose her own lover, later in a bold move she asks Cesario to marry her. This shows her desire to make her own romantic or sexual decisions. Viola too, uses similar tactics to achieve her end. These subversive techniques are a perfect example of discontent stemming from women in the contemporary society on account of having no power to exercise their rights. What here is the deeper reason behind these women subverting traditional gender expectations? The answer lies in what they gain – the chance to live outside social expectations set for them. It is not merely romantic interests but rights and authoritative power that they desire. Olivia lies and persuades people to support her deceptions to enable her to assert her autonomy with what she believes is her right to make decisions about love and marriage. Viola on the other hand, denies herself of her own gender so that in passing off as a man, she enjoys some of the privileges they enjoy. Hence, by confronting difficult social circumstances and challenges, Shakespeare allows many of his female characters to be elevated to heroic figures.

Other women characters that can be analysed in this light are Beatrice and Hero from *Much Ado about Nothing*. Though the play mainly focuses around Claudio and Hero, Benedick and Beatrice are the rounder characters that evolve and show complexities. Beatrice is intelligent, witty and firmly believes in the superiority of women, when Benedick says he loves no women, she replies, "A dear happiness to women: they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humor for that: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear, he loves me." (1.1.126)

Both Hero and Beatrice are manipulated by other characters in

the play. However, they are poles apart when it comes to exercising their decisions and having a mind of their own. Hero is weak and ineffectual even when she is publicly shamed on her wedding day. On the other hand, Beatrice makes a conscious decision to change her behaviour after listening to Hero and Ursula say with regards to Benedick. This ability to think for oneself and choose one's fate distinguishes them from each other. They represent two different stages on the route to female equality. Hero symbolizes aristocrat submissiveness, and blind compliance to gender expectations whereas Beatrice, by making her own decisions and speaking her mind symbolises a new direction. Shakespeare's own feminist views can be seen in the fact that he makes Beatrice the more likable and round character. However, his views are a little problematic to understand because in the play as Beatrice is also berated for being too 'shrew' like to find a husband. The relationship between the two couples can also be read on the lines of gender performativity, and the playwright's preference of Beatrice and Benedick is also very obvious. Claudio and Hero symbolize the type of unfair marriage that was atypical at that time. Hero is beautiful, loyal, and has a good inheritance and though she 'wins' in this war of sexes on account of her innocence being proved, ultimately her fate is a husband who is arrogant, unforgiving and jealous. On the other hand, between Beatrice and Benedick, no one is a winner and Between Beatrice and Benedick no one is a winner, and no loser, their relationship is based on mutual respect. Beatrice, had the option of marrying Don Pedro, and in this case, it is the most common path, because he is socially better off than her. However, she realizes her needs of an equal partner. The verbal duels are witty and entertaining but they symbolize a more important fact, the right to have an opinion of one's own. Also, Beatrice's financial status is never brought up. (Zitner) Finally, Beatrice and Benedick both make a conscious choice to wed the other, this decision being neither made for financial reasons or societal norms, making it the more ideal one. In many ways, Beatrice's character represents feminist ideals that Shakespeare seems to have believed in.

To conclude, some of the various women considered in this paper, are largely successful in challenging traditional expectations and gender roles. Others, however, were not. It can be argued that Shakespeare avoids a simple and straight delineation of his women characters. As his characters are not one-dimensional, and his opinions not entirely feminist, Shakespeare avoids a superficial approach to solving women's problems. Probably the traditional norms of the feminine were too powerful for him to completely reject them but his portrayal of many characters show progressive and feminist ideals. A constant negotiation of gender and power can be seen in his works where at once women are powerful characters in complete control of their decisions and desires while on the other hand they conform completely too traditional expectations. By creating complex and nuanced characters who are affable though questionable at many times, the reader is invited to form his or her own conclusions. The Bard's plays have to be understood in their historical contexts. The characters created by him, are authentic in their search for equality, power and purpose within the limitations put forth by the society they are pitted against. Within the confined opportunities available to them Shakespeare's women like Lady Macbeth, Katherine, Beatrice, Viola and Olivia are certainly powerful characters portrayed in their full human complexity

resisting societal expectations of the feminine and representing progressive ideas on gender.

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