

Title: The Representation of Women in Shakespeare's Plays

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William Shakespeare's portrayal of female characters has been a subject of debate for centuries after the playwright's creations have been introduced to the world. But why does the greatest Bard of all time generate such interest among the reading audience, especially when it comes to the depiction of women? Shakespeare's major tragedies, including *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*, have women placed in secondary roles and often treated as inferior to men in their lives. However, their formal social status often hides deeper influence behind the scenes, painting these women as grey cardinals coordinating the chain of events behind the scenes. Their actions and presence shape the narrative and reflect deeper themes of gender expectations.

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is a character that signals passivity. She is manipulated by every male figure in her life: her father Polonius, her brother Laertes, and even eventually by Hamlet himself. Her character is portrayed as obedient, passive, and having no agency of her own - her desires and ambitions are projected on her by males. Her descent into madness and subsequent demise are depicted as inevitable. The portrayal of Ophelia is what Elizabethan society demanded of women of the period - you had to stay docile, subservient, and allow males to dominate your life choices. Your subservience was the ultimate virtue, but it was condemned if it got out of hand.

Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* initially appears as a more dominant figure. She is the one who serves as a dark genius to Macbeth's ambition, fueling his desire for power and intentionally pushing him toward murder and treachery. We see her subverting traditional gender roles and expectations. She no longer appears passive - her power is cunning and intrigue behind closed doors. However, as the narrative progresses, she succumbs to

madness and guilt. Her mental health deteriorates, and now we see that she is a shadow of her former self, no longer plotting or wanting to overthrow the existing regime for the sake of ruling through fear (Professor Marianne Novy, 2017). Her position and descent into madness show how women with too much influence are punished through their ambition.

Desdemona in *Othello* represents the image of an idealized wife. She is passive, she does not demand too much, and she loves her husband despite his suspicions. However, her inability to provide sufficient proof of her innocence speaks of the limited agency women of the time possess in the face of unfair accusations. She is depicted as being completely innocent yet having limits to her agency. Her death symbolizes how the voice of women used to be dismissed or mistrusted, especially in a patriarchal structure that is governed by male honor and jealousy (Agnes Mure MacKenzie, 2011). This treatment of women mirrors the gender roles of females and males in Elizabethan society and should not be attributed to Shakespeare's views alone.

Although the majority of women depicted in the Bard's tragedies have very limited control, they can be used as examples of moral virtue, emotional strength, and the power of unbreakable spirit. Exploring these themes poses the question of whether Shakespeare was merely reflecting the cultural norms of the time or offering irony through the dramatic portrayal of females.

References

Professor Marianne Novy. (2017). *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory (Shakespeare and Theory)*. The Arden Shakespeare.

Agnes Mure MacKenzie (2011). *The Women in Shakespeare's Plays*. Literary Licensing, LLC.