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# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:2 February 2014

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Shakespeare's Plays: Men Celebrated, Women Despised?

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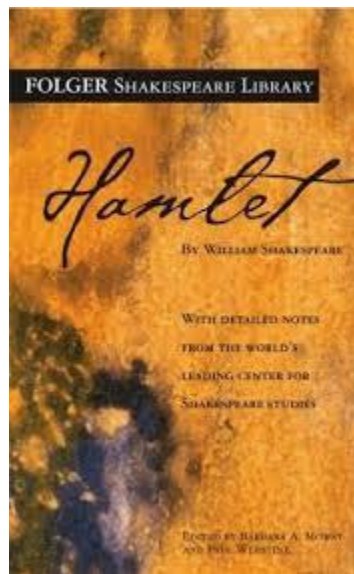
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Shakespeare's Plays: Men Celebrated, Women Despised?

## Introduction

Shakespeare, the bard of Avon, has created many tragic heroes, who are bestowed with numerous outstanding qualities, except for some tragic flaw. But as against his tragic heroes, the women characters in his tragedies seem to be designed, more or less as weak, treacherous, terribly naive, cruel, intriguing or stubborn individuals. In fact, in most of his tragedies, the women characters are made responsible, directly or indirectly, for the tragic end of the central character.

## Heinous Crime by Gertrude



Gertrude, for instance, in the play, *Hamlet*, is depicted in a negative light. It is she, who lets Claudius murder her husband. But for her passive support, Claudius would not have dared to accomplish such a horrible task. Her son Hamlet feels so much disappointed with the conduct of his mother, that he generalizes the weakness present in his mother, to women in general. He observes, “Frailty, thy name is woman” (1.2.146). He uses this phrase, keeping in mind, the infidelity of his mother, as she marries the assassin of her own husband, soon after the death of her husband. Hamlet feels so much disturbed and agonized with the idea that a woman can stoop so low, as to marry a man, much beneath her husband, just to fulfill her sexual desires, that he generalizes that being frail and being a woman, are synonymous with each other.

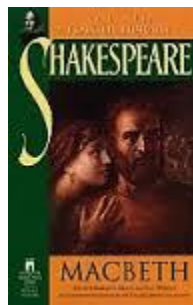
## **Infidelity of Gertrude**

Gertrude kept on pretending that she was extremely fond of her husband, while actually she was planning to get rid of him. However, her hasty marriage with her brother-in-law, after her husband's death, creates a doubt in her son's mind. He wonders:

“Why, she would hang on him  
As if increase of appetite had grown  
By what it fed on; and yet within a month  
Let me not think on't-Frailty, thy name is woman-  
A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,  
Like Niobe, all tears-why, she-  
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourn'd longer-married with my uncle,  
My father's brother...  
She married- O most wicked speed! To post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (1.2. 143-157).

The lust in Gertrude and her infidelity thereof, makes her fall in the eyes of her son as well as in the eyes of the spectators and the readers. But the question, whether Shakespeare actually believed in the “frailty” of women and in the fact that women lacked noble qualities; or was it just the demand of the conflict in the drama; which made him create such women characters and compelled him to put such dialogues regarding women, in the mouth of his characters, can be answered only after assessing the other tragedies written by him.

## **Ambitious and Cruel Lady Macbeth**



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If the other tragedies of Shakespeare be carefully read and assessed, it appears that he has actually celebrated his male characters as against the female ones. For instance, Macbeth is celebrated as a great warrior, a brave soldier, “valour’s minion,” (1.2.19) and “Bellona’s bridegroom” (1.2.54). On the other hand, his wife, Lady Macbeth, has been depicted in a negative shade. She is demonstrated as a shrewd and ambitious woman, who serves almost as the fourth witch to bring about the ruin of Macbeth.

### **Lady Macbeth: The Real Cause of Tragedy**

Macbeth, to begin with, no doubt desires to become the King, after hearing the prophecies made by the three witches. When he is announced as the Thane of Cawdor by Ross, he recalls that the witches had also greeted him with the same title and his mind begins to contemplate on the other prophecy, which promised that he would become the King:

“I am Thane of Cawdor:  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
Against the use of nature?” (1.3.132-136).

Later, when Duncan announces Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland and as his heir to the throne, Macbeth is seized by envy and he begins to look upon him as an impediment and a hurdle in his way to become the King. His mind begins to contrive horrible plans to remove this impediment:

“The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step  
On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap,  
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires:  
Let not light see my black and deep desires:  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.” (1.4.48-53).

But although Macbeth had initially desired to become the King, and for the purpose, he had also thought of removing the obstacles in an unfair way, yet the fact remains that he would

not have gone to the extent of committing the murder, if Lady Macbeth would not have pressurized him to do so.

### **Persuasion Power of Lady Macbeth**

At the very outset, when Lady Macbeth reads the letter of Macbeth, which carries the information regarding the prophecies made by the three witches, she seems determined to make sure that the prophecy made by the witches turns out to be true. However, she has her doubts regarding Macbeth's nature, which she believes, is too kind to execute a murder:

“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be  
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it.” (1.5.13-18).

She knows very well that, but for her persuasion, Macbeth would never murder Duncan. Therefore she decides to use her influence and the power of her speech to induce Macbeth to commit the foul deed. She eagerly waits for her husband to arrive, so that she may urge him to move in the direction of fulfilling his desires:

“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  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned withal.” (1.5. 23-28).

Just as Eve in “The Bible” had become responsible for Adam's downfall, Lady Macbeth in “Macbeth,” becomes instrumental in bringing about the demise and ruin of her husband.

### **Cruel Nature of Lady Macbeth**

As soon as a messenger announces the advent of Duncan and her husband at their castle of Inverness, she decides to get prepared to become all the more strong and daring, both for arranging the murder of her guest Duncan and for providing full strength and fortitude to her husband. She invokes the unseen powers to help her gain strength:

“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! Make thick my blood,  
...  
Come to my woman’s breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature’s mischief! ” (1.5. 38-48).

Eventually, when Duncan does arrive, Macbeth backs out from their plan to kill him and he decides not to harm the King in the slightest possible way. His conscience as a kinsman and as a host compels him to withdraw from their plan of murdering the King. He tells Lady Macbeth:

“We will proceed no further in this business:  
He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people...” (1.7. 31-33).

### **Clever Way of Persuasion**

However Lady Macbeth is determined not to let the opportunity slip from their hands. She rebukes Macbeth for being weak-willed and irresolute. She shows her resentment to Macbeth’s decision, by putting a series of questions to him. She inquires:

“Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?  
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
At what it did so freely? From this time  
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard  
To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire?"(1.7. 35-41).

She keeps on persuading Macbeth, by employing various strategies like exploiting his ambitious nature, challenging his bravery, doubting his steadfastness and resolution, and finally, by offering herself as a contrast to him. To take one example, she asks Macbeth:

“What beast was ‘t then  
That made you break this enterprise to me?  
When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man. ” (1.7. 47-51).

She goes on to the extent of declaring that if she had taken such a resolve, she would have gone to the extent of thrashing the brains of her own breast-feeding baby:

“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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this.” (1.7. 54-59).

Her art of persuasion is so fine and excellent, that Macbeth is left with no choice but to surrender himself completely before her. She seduces Macbeth to the evil course of action, the way Satan had tempted Eve, and Mephistopheles had tempted Dr. Faustus. Macbeth gets so much impressed and influenced with her proclamations, that he compliments her for being an exceptionally courageous woman:

“Bring forth men-children only;  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males.” (1.7. 65-67).

### **Determined to Commit Murder**

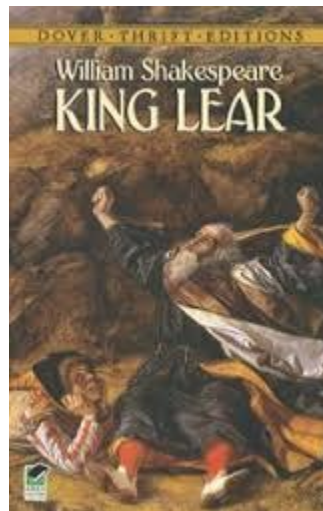
Finally Lady Macbeth becomes successful, in boosting up the spirits of Macbeth by instilling courage in him and in making him determined to proceed with his plan of murdering Duncan, in order to become a King. Influenced by Lady Macbeth's arguments, Macbeth declares:

“I am settled and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.” (1.7. 79-80).

When Macbeth once again hesitates to murder the King, immediately before the actual murder, Lady Macbeth again instigates and prompts him, by arguing that if Duncan had not resembled her own father, she would herself have murdered him.

It's true that Macbeth had also conceived the thought of murdering Duncan. But after a little contemplation, he had made up his mind not to commit such a foul deed. It was Lady Macbeth, who did not let him step back. Thus, just as in the case of *Hamlet*, in the tragedy of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is more responsible for the tragedy as compared to her husband.

### **Filial Ingratitude of Goneril and Regan**



Shakespeare's third tragedy *King Lear*, takes up the story of a King, who suffers at the hands of his two daughters and goes mad. In this tragedy too, the sources of all trouble are - women. When Lear decides to divide his kingdom and property among his daughters, the elder

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two daughters shrewdly befool him with their affectionate words of praise for their father, and both manage to get, half the kingdom each. But as soon as they become the masters of the kingdom, they begin to consider Lear, their father, a burden on them and in order to get rid of him, they behave callously towards him. They start questioning their father's need to keep hundred knights with him. Lear gets so surprised with the behaviour of his elder daughter Goneril that he says:

“I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad:  
I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell.  
We'll no more meet, no more see one another;  
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;  
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,  
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,  
A plague- sore or embossed carbuncle,  
In my corrupted blood. But I'll not chide thee;  
Let shame come when it will, I do not call it;

...

I can be patient; I can stay with Regan,  
I and my hundred knights.” (2.4. 239- 252).

He decides to stay with his second daughter Regan, but even she proves to be no better than her elder sister. She justifies her sister's conduct, even before her sister arrives, and she tells her father:

“O, Sir! You are old;  
Nature in you stands on the very verge  
Of her confine: you should be rul'd and led  
By some discretion that discerns your state  
Better than you yourself. Therefore I pray you  
That to our sister you do make return;  
Say you have wrong'd her.” (2.4. 156- 162).

## Plight of Broken Heart Lear

Lear keeps on oscillating between the two sisters and ultimately he realizes that both are reluctant to keep him with them. Rejected by his daughters, he turns to the Gods to grant him the power of endurance:

“You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!-  
You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!  
If it be you that stirs these daughters’ hearts  
Against their father, fool me not so much  
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,  
And let not women’s weapons, water-drops,  
Stain my man’s cheeks!”(2.4. 298-305).

The speech of Lear at the inhuman behaviour of his daughters is so moving and heart-rending, that one cannot help but shed tears at his words. He says:

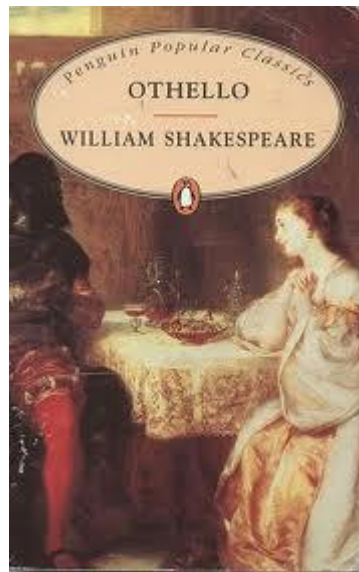
“No, you unnatural hags,  
I will have such revenges on you both  
That all the world shall- I will do such things,  
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be  
The terrors of the earth. You think I’ll weep;  
No, I’ll not weep:  
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart  
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws  
Or ere I’ll weep. O Fool! I shall go mad.” (2.4. 305- 313).

The cruel and insensitive behaviour of Lear’s daughters makes him reach on the verge of insanity. Such ingratitude is common in the relationship of sons and fathers. However, Shakespeare has made the daughters, an embodiment of ingratitude towards their father, which is quite rare. The daughters, in the play, are portrayed as completely inhuman creatures, who are not content with getting rid of their father; they even plan to get him murdered.

### **Daughters are Shown as Demons**

Thus women in Shakespeare's plays, appear to be extremely callous, cruel and insensitive. Goneril and Regan are not only avaricious, ruthless and cruel, but they are immodest, shameless and infidel too. Goneril, for instance, plans to murder her husband in order to marry Edmund. As far as Regan is considered, she is by no means better than her sister. As soon as her husband dies of a fatal wound, she decides to get married to Edmund. Both the ladies have no scruples at all. In order to win Edmund as their husband, both develop a mutual jealousy with each other, and Goneril goes to the extent of murdering Regan. Thus both these ladies are depicted as completely devoid of all virtues and totally insensitive towards their father, sister and husbands. In fact they are demons in the shape of women.

### **Desdemona as Weak and Foolish Wife**



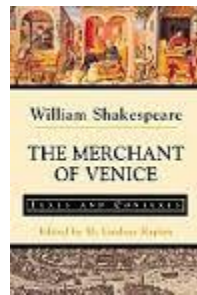
Desdemona, in the play, *Othello*, is no doubt presented as a submissive and naive woman. But even she falls short of being a good wife. Knowing very well that her husband gets irritated by her consistent pleading for reinstating Cassio, she keeps on pleading for him. Therefore, to some extent, she is also responsible for her tragic plight. She fails to maintain a balance between her twin identities, one as a good human being and the other as a good wife. Her goodness as a human being makes her seem an unfaithful wife. Any wise woman would have preferred to win the confidence of her husband as a newly-wed bride, rather than going on praising a third man

consistently and pleading his case before her husband constantly. Desdemona, therefore, cannot be called a wise woman; howsoever good she may be considered, as a human being.

### **Women Characters are Responsible for Tragedy**

Thus Shakespeare has created his women characters in such way, that they seem to be responsible for the tragedies, in one way or the other. Gertrude in *Hamlet*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Desdemona in *Othello* and Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* are responsible for the respective tragedies. Except for Desdemona, the other women characters mentioned above, fall short of being considered virtuous women too.

### **Portia is a Dynamic Character**



Lady Macbeth is shrewd and contriving in disposition, Gertrude is infidel, while Goneril and Regan are the very embodiments of vice. However, to regard Shakespeare, a misogynist, on the basis of the above conclusions, would be a hasty judgment as well as a grave dishonour to the playwright. If he has created such women who are responsible for the tragedies, he has also not failed to create such women, who are vibrant and dynamic individuals. Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*, alone is sufficient to establish the fact that Shakespeare had no intention to celebrate men and despise women in his plays. Portia is created as a female, who is not responsible for a tragedy, but who is instrumental in averting a tragedy.

### **Portia as Beautiful and Noble Lady**

Portia is depicted as extremely beautiful yet noble woman. She is endowed with all the charms and qualities, which a human being can possess. The fact that she was beautiful beyond any description of words, is evident by the very fact that numberless suitors came to Belmont, with a view to win her hand in marriage, and risked to choose one casket, knowing very well

that, if they failed in choosing the right casket, they would not only lose Portia, but the very right to court any other woman in their life-time.

Shakespeare has delineated Portia as a very humble lady. Although she is much superior to Bassanio, on account of her looks, status and other qualities, she modestly offers herself and her possessions to him and wishes that she had them in much more quantity, so that she could have offered them to him.

### **Sense of Wisdom in Portia**

Shakespeare has portrayed Portia as the very embodiment of generosity. As soon as she learns that the dearest friend of her husband is in trouble on account of her husband's fault, she immediately directs her husband to stand by his friend in his trouble. Not only that, she offers her wealth to Bassanio, to relieve his friend from the financial trouble and from the consequences of the forfeiture of the bond.

But the most outstanding quality, with which Shakespeare has bestowed her, is her wisdom and intellect. She manages to achieve that, which the entire Venice, including the Duke, Antonio, Bassanio, Gratiano and other men, had failed to achieve.

She disguises herself as a male lawyer and requests Shylock to forgive Antonio. Then she goes on to press upon Shylock to except the money mentioned in the bond. Finally, she turns the tables on Shylock, by playing upon the words written in the bond, and by saying that Shylock should make sure that he should cut exactly one pound of flesh from Antonio's body-neither less, nor more. She also insists that, since there is no mention of the drops of blood in the bond, therefore Shylock should take care that not even a single drop of blood gets dropped from Antonio's body. When Shylock tries to avoid getting into the trouble, he says that he would better get satisfied with having the money. But now Portia argues that since Shylock had insisted on having only the pound of flesh, he would get nothing else. She further lands Shylock in trouble by accusing him of trying to conspire against the life of a citizen of Venice and by arguing that according to the laws, he would have to give half of his property to Antonio, while the other half, will be confiscated by the state.

## Most Brilliant and Versatile Women Characters

The way in which, Portia saves the life of her husband's dearest friend, throws light on her wisdom, intellect, presence of mind and witty disposition. Her sense of humour gets revealed in the trial scene, as well as in the way, in which she manages to get her ring from her husband, in the guise of the lawyer, and also in the way, she accuses him of having given the ring, to some other woman.

Portia is an outstanding, marvelous and dynamic character sketched by Shakespeare. Such a versatile character is rare to be found in English literature. The very fact that Shakespeare has created Portia, proves that he had no prejudices for the weaker sex in his mind. Moreover, if he has created evil women characters in his plays, he has not spared his male characters either. If Gertrude is responsible for the murder of the King, Claudius is equally responsible. If Lady Macbeth is responsible for pressurizing Macbeth to murder Duncan, it is Macbeth, who first conceives the idea to do so. Moreover, the subsequent murders of Banquo and Macduff's wife and his son are not planned by Lady Macbeth, but by Macbeth himself. If Shakespeare has depicted Goneril and Regan as infidel daughters, he has not spared Edmund, who is equally infidel towards his father. Moreover, if Shakespeare had got any bias for women in his mind, he would not have created noble women characters like Cordelia and Desdemona in his dramas. In fact, in one of his tragedies, *Othello*, Shakespeare has even made one of his female characters espouse the cause of women. The speech seems to echo "feminism," although the term had not been coined, when Shakespeare made Emilia to utter these words:

“Let husbands know

Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,

And have their palates both for sweet and sour,

As husbands have. What is it that they do

When they change us for others? Is it sport?

I think it is. And doth affection breed it?

I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?

It is so too. And have not we affections,

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

Then let them use us well: else let them know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.” (4.3. 92- 102).

The speech of Emilia, focuses on the right of women to betray their husbands, if they themselves get betrayed. Although morally it cannot be considered the right course of action yet the speech successfully exposes the double-standards of human beings, where there is one set of principles for the husbands and the other for wives. The writer, who puts such dialogues in the mouth of one of his women characters, can by no means be considered as misogynist. Rather, he is the one who considers human beings only as human beings and not as men or women.

### Conclusion

It is for this very reason that each and every dialogue spoken by Shakespeare’s characters, seems to be completely justified. He has created such a wonderful galaxy of characters, where the angels are represented both by men and by women and the role of demons is also enacted and played by both the sexes. Gender hardly determines the nature of a character, in the plays of Shakespeare. It is for this very reason, that his plays are read, viewed and enjoyed by both the sexes equally, even after five hundred years of their composition. Ben Jonson, his friend and the great poet – dramatist himself, rightly exclaimed in his poem *To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare*:

“He was not of an age, but for all time!”

(Jonson in *Preface to 1623 Folio of Comedies, Histories & Tragedies*).

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... *The Merchant of Venice*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2002.

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