

Subversion and Conformity: Gender Roles in Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract

The paper shall examine the multidimensional gender role application in both William Shakespeare tragedies, specializing on the means by which the traditional gender expectations are adhered to / defied in the characterization and the conclusion of the story. Shakespeare tragic characters like Macbeth, Othello and Hamlet, Shakespeare tragedies as well as those portrayed in Antony and Cleopatra are presented in the backdrop of Elizabethan patriarchal norms wherein the characters are presented that challenge and conform to gender stereotypes. Female characters such as Desdemona portray an ideal femininity which have caused their downfalls whereas such characters as Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra challenge these ideals by being ambitious and wanting to take action, which in turn causes societal and individual failure. Tough requirements of the stoic masculinity are to be traced in the male characters Hamlet and Othello who under the pressure of these requirements show the harmful consequences of hard rigid gender norms. There is an element of gender performativity also provided by the theatrical culture of Shakespeare, in which the actors were all male, foreshadowing contemporary theories of the social construction of gender, especially as developed by Judith Butler. The feminist, queer and intersectional critique has led to the recognition that with gender in Shakespeare tragedies, questions of power, identity, race, and class are all intermixed. The plays ultimately show the limiting nature of gender, and its subversion, establishing Shakespeare within the context of his time but also as a rebel against stiff rules that defined an individual.

Keywords: Shakespeare, gender roles, tragedy, performativity, feminism

Introduction

In Elizabethan England, gender roles were rigidly defined and strictly enforced. Men were expected to embody rationality, strength, and public authority, while women were largely confined to the private sphere, expected to be obedient, passive, and chaste. Patriarchal norms governed every aspect of social life, with marriage and family reinforcing male dominance and female subservience. These expectations extended to cultural productions, including the theatre, where all female roles were performed by men, further complicating the portrayal of gender.

Shakespeare's plays were written at a time when certain gender roles were hurriedly accepted and resisted, so he created characters who did both things. His novels examine the contemporary beliefs about gender at the same time as they show the world he lived in. Exploring Lady Macbeth, Othello, and Cleopatra allows readers to see how gender expectations can change or disturb a person's identity, beliefs, and authority. Shakespeare uses

drama, speeches alone, and action to show that gender is a topic to be explored and possibly debated on stage.

In his tragedies, Shakespeare stays close to traditional gender stereotypes, but he also challenges these ideas by showing important departures. When Shakespeare writes about characters who fight against or are brought down by what is considered acceptable for their gender, he points out the contradictions in such roles and suggests gender is just a role people act out.

Historical and Theatrical Background

At that time, gender stereotypes were strongly guided by beliefs that put men first. The hierarchy in everyday life was believed to be set by God so that men were thought to be in charge and to have more wisdom, while women were deemed emotional, without the same wisdom, and needed male leadership. The Bible taught that an obedient wife and a strong husband should exist within a marriage. Society and legislation at the time discouraged women from speaking, made them keep their purity, and stay submissive to men. Because of these beliefs, many books and dramas made characters who showed the right or wrong way to behave.

Since women were banned from acting on the English stage before the Restoration, young actors would take on all the female parts. Because of this style, the way gender was shown and thought of in drama was greatly affected. Since actresses played female roles created by men, questions arose concerning how true their acting was as well as their motives for doing so. By choosing to cross genders, the comedians showed that imitating, overemphasizing, and even faking gender are possible, perhaps without realizing that their gesture meant the theatricality of gender. Shakespeare realized the play's reliance on gender confused characters, often making use of disguise, cross-dressing, and other sources of confusion about people's identities.

Despite following the norms of his time, Shakespeare sometimes hints that there is something wrong with popular views on gender. His plays do not only support usual beliefs about gender, but they point out the problems and effects that come from those strict expectations. Like Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, women characters in these works challenge traditional gender roles, yet men such as Hamlet and Othello have a harder time living up to masculine standards of honor, getting revenge, and hiding their feelings. Because Shakespeare depicts genders in a complex way, he demonstrates his understanding of and views on the gender ideologies of his time.

Conformity to Gender Roles in Tragedies

Othello's Desdemona displays what early modern society thought was ideal for a woman: following instruction, being pure, and being faithful to her husband no matter what. Even though Desdemona runs away with Othello at the beginning, she soon becomes someone who gives up her own needs and obeys. Even though he becomes violent and full of doubts, she stays devoted and patient with him. It becomes very sad when she allows others to wrongly accuse her and simply accepts her outcome, not reacting much. Her tragic end points out that

being the ideal “virtuous woman” can cause great harm, since women who fit this description do not speak up and their efforts are still not rewarded.

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is a good example of how much was expected of a man to be honourable, dutiful, and keep control of himself. Hamlet struggles with his own existence because he is unable to unite his conscience with the need for strong retaliation as a man. While Hamlet thinks inwardly and doesn’t make decisions, Laertes and Fortinbras are quick to act, and this places Hamlet between what society expects from a man and his own reluctance. Being unable to show feelings towards Ophelia and his grief clearly highlights the danger of strict masculine ideals. Even though following the path of a stoic warrior fits the typical hero mold, it also clearly displays the effects of adhering to tough male roles.

Most of Shakespeare’s tragedies end with the order of male over female being reaffirmed once the families recover from the crisis caused by changing gender roles. If a female character goes against the expected gender roles, such as Desdemona, Ophelia, or Lady Macbeth, tragedy usually strikes and the character dies. At the same time, men who cannot act like strong and confident men end up suffering. The ascent of authority to male characters like Fortinbras and Lodovico seems to bring power back to what traditional roles once were. For this reason, although Shakespeare looks at different gender roles, the finales of his tragedies usually support traditional ways of thinking, highlighting the strain between what a person is and how he or she must behave in society.

Subversion of Gender Expectations

Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth is a known example of a woman who wants power instead of praise for being a lady. Ever since hearing about the witches’ prophecy, she wants to be free of her womanhood, and she asks the spirits to help make her not a woman. Not having children and turning to violence defy the gentle and caring role that women usually had in that society. She influences Macbeth to commit Duncan’s murder and shows a typical male level of ardent ambition. Still, her decline into guilt, experiencing hallucinations, and the act of suicide is an indication that living against traditional gender roles was difficult for her. The moral downfall of the main character proves society’s fears of women’s independence and also criticizes an order where women have no valid way to rise and control their lives.

Cleopatra did not reject her femininity; on the contrary, she used it with pride and showed its value in her role and life. Cleopatra uses her emotions and alluring looks to help her in political matters, unlike Lady Macbeth. Instead of conforming to Roman beliefs about women, she represents herself as a queen as well as a lover, also playing the role of one who tricks and manipulates as well as someone whose end is tragic. Carmen’s character is changing, theatrical, and brave, and people who meet her often call her both good and bad, which shows how much she refuses to be defined by labels. Choosing to die rather than accept Roman rule is known as one of the last demonstrations of Cleopatra’s power. This character’s style of femininity is seen as strongly empowered and still draws attention, which goes against the divide between male and female roles.

Even though Twelfth Night is a comedy, Viola’s masquerade as Cesario shows that there can be more flexibility in gender roles than the tragedies show. Wearing her disguise, she has to

handle both identity and desire, as she lives as a man and a woman. Even though her story ends without much risk, it exposes Shakespeare's interest in gender being easily transformed and shows how important that is when considering the dangers faced by Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra.

Theatrical Performance and Gender Fluidity

[In the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre women were legally banned from acting on stage and thus all female roles were played by young boys, or young men.] As a theatrical theme per se, it destabilized any fixed gender identity. Femininity audiences saw was the production on a male body and the built-in ambiguity between genders in presentation. In tragedies such as Macbeth, Othello and Antony and Cleopatra this habit introduced a more sophisticated element to these representations of women in particular, women who broke feminine codes. A figure such as Lady Macbeth, a play boy who characterizes a woman yearning to become an unsexed male-persona, imposes the issues of gender imitation on top of gender denial. The audience is welcome to wonder not only about the reality of gendered conduct in this multi-layered performance but also about the ground of gender as such.

Judith Butler, a present-day gender theorist, believes that gender is not the unchangeable identification, but an act of repetition, which is determined by cultural codes. This theory is performed unintentionally in the stage of Shakespeare, hundreds of years before Butler managed to express it. The role of characters in the play as well as in theatre in terms of their gender is both fictional as well as real. Lady Macbeth enacts masculinity by aggressiveness and dominance; Cleopatra enacts femininity as drama and sexy attraction. These are performances in the sense that they are contingent, unstable, cyclical, unpredictable, and often conflicting, of the reality that gender is not a state of being, but an act. These plays are more theatrical in their dealing with Shakespearean tragedies, which are ripe shores of contemplating gender as constructed and unstable instead of biologically naturally given.

The resultant effect of the men playing the women, a woman taking on the male roles of dominance and degradation, and the men attempting to cope with their emotional side can be summed up as a continual breaking of the rules of communication between the gender in Shakespearean tragedies. It is not a coincidence that Hamlet is indecisive and voyeuristic, being traditionally coded as feminine, whereas it is Lady Macbeth who is ruthless, whereas this characteristic is traditionally masculine. Cleopatra on the other hand is a personification of seductiveness and a political authority. Such characters are difficult to pin down and play with the fixity of gender roles in early modern England. The performance of gender, both in play and in the medium of play, the theatre, poses Shakespeare as a writer with a vision of gender as malleable, ever-changing, and terribly theatrical.

Critical Perspectives

Feminist criticism has long examined how Shakespeare's tragedies reinforce or challenge the patriarchal ideologies of his time. Critics have noted the little role the women characters such as Desdemona and Ophelia had as their lives were much influenced by the decisions and actions of men. Nevertheless, Moments of resistance and complexity as read by feminism are also found in such characters as Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra who resist the norms of domesticity

and bend to play power games politically or psychologically. According to feminist critics, Shakespeare, although in some way reproducing misogyny of his culture, also reveals exploitative relations of power that entangle women and contribute to their destruction, thus creating a reservoir of criticism and revision.

Queer theory offers an alternative lens for analyzing gender and sexuality in Shakespeare's work, particularly by interrogating binary oppositions and normative identities. Homosexual under text, cross-dressing, and gender fluid performance implies that Shakespeare was indeed interested in indulging in the unstable categories of genders, possibly unintentionally. The performance of masculinity or female masculinity by male actors such as Hamlet or in the case of Cleopatra and Desdemona portrayed by a man can be rewritten using queer interpretations. Such readings critique the belief that Shakespeare simply reflected the traditional roles and in their place propose that Shakespeare in his plays foreshadowed postmodern theories of identity and desire.

To go further into the analysis, the intersectional criticism looks at the intersections of gender roles in Shakespearean tragedies with class and race, as well as privileges of political power. Lady Macbeth is a woman with ambition that is not only dependent on gender but also social status- as a noblewoman with desire to have a role back by means of her spouse. The image of Cleopatra is also overshadowed by her racial and cultural background as the queen of Egypt through the perspective of Roman (and consequent mistaken Perspective, given to Roman (and by extension, Western) imperialism. The gender issues are complicated by the social order and xenophobia to such an extent that Desdemona went against the authoritative rules of her father and even married Othello, a representative of a different race. Intersectional analysis therefore indicates that in Shakespeare tragedies genders were never separated- they were just components of a larger scheme of power relations.

Conclusion

By looking closely at the plays of Shakespeare the tragedies, it is apparent that though the plays tend to pass through the existing gender norms of the Elizabethan and the Jacobean period, on many occasions, Shakespeare tends to challenge and complicate the same. Female characters like Desdemona and Hamlet correspond to the traditional generational role but their stories show that such fixed gender roles could be restrictive and dangerous. Conversely, such characters as Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra challenge the moral codes of their civilizations, but suffer sad ends that underscore cultural fears of the strong, deviant women.

Shakespeare does not provide us with a plain strengthening of patriarchal values. His tragedies can be seen as the reflections of the current gender ideologies as well as the subtle commentaries on their limitations. Through introducing the audience to characters who are troubled by, controlled by, or ruined by gendered expectations, Shakespeare reveals the performative aspect of gender and the psychological, political, and social results of insisting on the limited binaries. The theatrical traditions such as his propensity to use all-male cast further tear down the boundaries between masculinity and femininity by creating the stage of conformity and resistance at the same time.

The constantly occurring gender play as explored by Shakespeare can be taken as a rather pertinent example of performance, identity, and power in the current context. The tensions facing his characters still ring true in an age where gender fluidity, intersectionality and the performative nature of identity are becoming household terms. Shakespeare tragedies can do more than lend us a historical perspective therefore, they are, as feminist and queer readings have demonstrated, a timeless prism through which norms that govern our view of gender today may be interrogated and disrupted.

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