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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SELECT PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE:A STUDY IN FEMINIST  
PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

Numerous characters appear in the works of England's most prominent play writer, William Shakespeare. Most of the time, his male protagonists possess various and complex characteristics throughout the storyline of his work, making it interesting for the readers to analyze their actions in many different aspects. However, some critics argue that unlike male characters, Shakespeare's female characters are rather more flat and one-sided, pointing out that they are either the extreme version of good or evil. Especially, it is a significant topic to discuss in the modern days, considering the fact that gender stereotype is now a sensitive issue. Starting from such argument, it is important to address their purpose of being in the play and suggest their meaning to the modern readers of today. In this context, this paper analyzes several female characters of Shakespeare's work by closely examining their actions and lines. The characters analyzed are Ophelia from Hamlet, Cordelia from King Lear, Katherine from The Taming of the Shrew, Goneril from King Lear and Lady Macbeth from Macbeth. Nevertheless, some female protagonists of Shakespeare's work do not fall in to this category and exceed the limitations of others. Therefore this paper proposes alternative characters such as Juliet from Romeo and Juliet and Portia from The Merchant of Venice that are rather more complex and difficult to include in just one category. By doing so, this paper critically analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of many female characters in Shakespeare's play.

**Keywords**—Female Characters, Gender Stereotype, William Shakespeare

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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare is England's most well-known play writer/poet and he wrote numerous plays throughout his years. Some of his plays are tragedies and others are comedies, but the interesting fact is that no matter what kind of genre the play is included in, the female characters tend to fall in either one out of two

categories: the submissive or the wicked. The submissive characters are generally very feminine and they are forced to obey the orders that are placed before them, whether they like it or not. As for the submissive characters, there could be Ophelia from Hamlet, Cordelia from King Lear and Katherine from The Taming of the Shrew. On the other hand, as for the evil female characters who are the antagonists of the play, there could be Goneril from King Lear and Lady Macbeth from Macbeth. Submissive or wicked, female characters are always a little extreme in these plays. Although it is difficult to find well-balanced female characters that possess the virtues of different natures, there could be some alternative characters such as Juliet from Romeo and Juliet or Portia from The Merchant of Venice . By analyzing the female characters in Shakespeare's work, it is possible to critically address their purpose of being in the play and their strengths and limits as well.

## **II. The Submissive**

### **A. Ophelia from Hamlet**

To begin with, the most typical example of a submissive female characters presented by Shakespeare, would be Ophelia from Hamlet. Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, who is the king's advisor. Polonius likes to be in favor of the king Claudius, who is in an opposing structure with Hamlet. Thus, Polonius orders Ophelia to reject Hamlet's love and stop receiving anything that could prove it as well and Ophelia does exactly as she is told to. "No, my good lord; but, as you did command, I did repel his letters and denied his access to me" [1] Ophelia and Hamlet were lovers before the whole tragedy begun, so as for Ophelia, it might be obvious that she does not want to be separated with her lover and be used as a tool of her father. However, Ophelia does not even say a word that she does not wish to play a part in this and does not seem to deeply care on whether her father treats her like some cattle and 'lease' her or not. Not one character in the play deeply cares about how Ophelia would be feeling during the whole situation and even when Hamlet himself tells her to go to a nunnery, Polonius is only thinking about using Gertrude next time for his scheme, but not about his own daughter being hurt by Hamlet's words. Obeying and relying on Males such as her father and Hamlet is so obvious to Ophelia that she loses her senses when receiving the news that her father has been killed by Hamlet. Depending on one's father before marriage and on one's husband after marriage, was the general way of living for the women during that period. Therefore, Ophelia had no choice but to go insane after losing the two people at the same time that she should have been relying on; her father and her future husband.

### **B. Cordelia from King Lear**

Secondly, the next obedient female character from Shakespeare's work is Cordelia from King Lear. Cordelia is the only daughter of King Lear that has a sincere heart and believes in speaking the truth. She is the fairest of the three daughters and King Lear himself used to like her the most, among them. However, when asked to explain how much the three daughters love their father, Cordelia speaks too honestly with no false praises, unlike her sisters. King Lear rages after listening to Cordelia's reply and banishes her from England. Having nowhere else to go, Cordelia accepts the French King's proposal and does not appear in the play until the last part where she forgives King Lear for misjudging her.

Like the typical female protagonists of Shakespeare, Cordelia too is obedient to males: her father and husband. When she was the daughter of her father, she completely follows the instructions that were given to her, and when she becomes the wife of her husband, she then again tries to be a submissive wife. She herself admits that the quantity of her love is divided and that half of it is King Lear's and the other half is for her husband. "Good my Lord, you have begot me, bred me, lov'd me; I Return those duties back as are right fit, obey you, love you, and most honour you. Why have my sisters husbands, if they say they love you all? Haply, when I shall wed, that lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry half my love with him, half my care and duty. Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, to love my father all." [2] This means that either way, the whole quantity of love that she contains is entirely for males, specifically for her father and husband, both beings that she should serve as a female.

### **C. Katherine from The Taming of the Shrew**

The obedient female character that gives the biggest astonishment to the readers is Katherine from The Taming of the Shrew. At first, readers might question why Katherine is included in the list of submissive

woman. Katherine seems like the prime example of a woman, free from the taming of the society. She is rude to her father, strikes her sister and most importantly has no respect for her husband, Petruchio. "Call you me daughter? Now I promise you you have show'd a tender fatherly regard to wish me wed to one half lunatic, a mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack, that thinks with oaths to face the matter out." [3] She presents some sort of catharsis whenever she speaks or acts against the conventional forces such as her father and husband.

Nevertheless, after marrying Petruchio, whenever she tries to go against his orders, she eventually ends up with a bigger consequence and gives Petruchio what he wants: her obedience. When the play reaches its' end, Katherine is completely changed in to a suitable wife that any male would desire his wife to be and she becomes even more obedient than her younger sister who was considered to be kind and virtuous. The last speech of Katherine's, tells the readers that her former ideals as a free and witty woman are all gone and now she believes that women should praise their husbands, who work so hard to maintain the family, as wives doing nothing at home, but care about useless matters. She describes husbands as beings that should be worshiped and wives as beings that are incapable and should be thankful of the generosity that their husbands grant.

"Fie, fie! Unknit that threatening unkind brow, and dart not scornful glances from those eyes to wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor. It blots thy beauty as frosts do bite the meads, confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds, and in no sense is meet or amiable. A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled-muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty; and while it is so, none so dry or thirsty will deign to sip or touch one drop of it. thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee, and for thy maintenance commits his body to painful labour both by sea and land, to watch the night in storms, the day in cold, whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe; and craves no other tribute at thy hands but love, fair looks, and true obedience- too little payment for so great a debt" [4] The old Katherine is completely shattered in pieces and instead, she is replaced with the perfect angel of the house. The character that seemed most liberal to the social conventions, turned out to become the most obedient and submissive female and this disappoints the readers who supported her lively spirit.

### **III. The Wicked**

#### **A. Goneril from *King Lear***

On the other hand, in the opposition of the sweet and virtuous female characters, Shakespeare also presents fierce and wicked female antagonists that have a distinct difference with the other women. A prominent character from Shakespeare's play would be Goneril from *King Lear*. Goneril and Regan are Cordelia's two older sisters and they pleased their father with all kinds of false praises, unlike Cordelia who spoke nothing, but the truth. Goneril, especially received the most from *King Lear* and also is presented as, a little more vicious than Regan, since Goneril is the one who poisoned her. At first Goneril seems to be kind to her father, but a while after she ends her act as a loving daughter, she shows her true mind by speaking words with thorns to *King Lear* and treats him poorly which eventually causes him to lose his mind. "Hear, me, my lord. What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five, to follow in a house where twice so many have a command to tend you?" [5]

However, the sudden change of manners of both daughters Goneril and Regan is a little too sudden and the attitude that they present are way too extreme. This extreme behavior of Goneril is beyond understanding and leaves no choice, but for the readers to criticize her. Shakespeare gives no cause for the readers to understand her or defend her. The only effect that Goneril's personality gives is that it makes her sister Cordelia's nature to seem more tender and justifies her absolute femininity. Therefore, Goneril's disagreeable personality is built so that obedient and submissive characters such as Cordelia would seem more desirable in comparison.

#### **B. Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth***

The other female character that has a strong personality is Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*. After hearing the prophecy from the three witches, Macbeth sends a letter explaining about it to his wife, Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth, wishing so desperately for the prophecy to come true, is more eager than Macbeth

to kill the king. Whenever when Macbeth hesitates to put his thoughts in action because of the fear that he might fail, it is Lady Macbeth who encourages him and even plans the murder before Macbeth. "We fail! But screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep— whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey soundly invite him—his two chamberlains will I with wine and wassail so convince that memory, the warder of the brain, shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason a limbeck only: when in swinish sleep their drenched natures lie as in a death, what cannot you and I perform upon the unguarded Duncan? What not put upon his spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt of our great quell?" [6]

Likewise, Lady Macbeth is widely known to be a femme fatal who seduces a man and then leads him to destruction. Women who are called a femme fatal have always been the type that men should avoid. Women who have ambition and desire masculine factors such as power and honor were often denounced as a femme fatal. This works as a certain type of a badge of shame and blame for the women who dare tried to cross over the boundary of males. Thus, calling women with a strong character like Lady Macbeth, a femme fatal, Macbeth's murder could now be justified that he was misguided by his poisonous wife. Blaming everything on a female who is believed to be deserving of condemnation, Macbeth is now even sympathized by the readers.

#### **IV. Alternatives**

After analyzing a couple of female characters from Shakespeare's plays, it is clear that most women in Shakespeare's work are either virtuous or vicious. However, alternative female characters do exist in Shakespeare's work as well, such as Juliet and Portia.

##### **A. Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet***

First of all, Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet*, is one of the female characters who bravely defied against the patriarchal rules that repressed her. In a situation where the only choice she had was to obey her father in marrying Paris instead of the one she loves, Juliet does not hesitate in expressing her opinion to her father. "Now, by Saint Peter's Church and Peter too, he shall not make me there a joyful bride. I wonder at this haste; that I must wed ere he, that should be husband, comes to woo. I pray you, tell my lord and father, madam, I will not marry yet; and, when I do, I swear, it shall be Romeo, whom you know I hate, rather than Paris. These are news indeed!" [7] While rejecting her mother who delivered her father's words, Juliet even manages to insert her secret lover's name 'Romeo' in her speech, swearing to herself that she would marry no one else but him. Also, before she takes the vial that she received from Friar Laurence, she fears that a death-like sleep might not bring her back, but she takes the vial anyway because she knows that living in the conventional system is worse than dying. She would rather free herself than to live in such tortures for the rest of her life. "Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again. I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins, that almost freezes up the heat of life: I'll call them back again to comfort me: Nurse! What should she do here? My dismal scene I needs must act alone. Come, vial. What if this mixture do not work at all? Shall I be married then tomorrow morning? No, no: this shall forbid it: lie thou there" [8]

##### **B. Portia from *The Merchant of Venice***

Furthermore, Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* is the typical model character when it comes to wisdom. Portia being a female during the Renaissance period was prevented from engaging in any public trials or important social events. However, she does not give up in helping her husband Bassanio and his friend Antonio. She crosses the boundary of a woman and disguises as a man in order to fulfill her intentions. Her bright intelligence brings about a cunning point to argue in contrary to Shylock's argument and she proves herself to be wiser than any male who was present during the trial. "Tarry a little; there is something else. This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh.' Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh; But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed one drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate unto the state of Venice." [9] Moreover, she notices the faint, yet recognizable homosexual emotions between her husband Bassanio and his friend Antonio. She does not make a fuss about this or even mention it out loud to her husband. She would rather test Bassanio by checking on what he does with the ring that she gave him. When she questions about the ring after Bassanio returns home,

Antonio speaks on behalf of his friend, mentioning that Bassanio will never more break her faith. Portia cleverly catches this moment and asks Antonio to be the witness of their faith, which prevents him from further developing a sexual emotion towards her husband. "Then you shall be his surety. Give him this and bid him keep it better than the other." [10] Like so, Portia is capable of keeping her identity and co-existing with males at the same time rather than being completely submissive or destructive towards them.

#### **V. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is not an exaggeration to point out the fact that the female characters in William Shakespeare's works have a tendency to be extreme in one out of two categories. Ophelia, Cordelia and Katherine are the women who were submissive and obedient to the male characters who are normally their father and husband while strong characters such as Goneril and Lady Macbeth show an extreme side of tenacity that it only gives the readers a chance to dislike them rather than a chance to understand them. Such tendencies were obvious and common enough to be the basics of the majority of Shakespeare's plays. Nevertheless, there are still female characters such as Juliet and Potia who are included in an alternative category, unlike the other characters that were previously addressed. Please submit your manuscript electronically for review as e-mail attachments. When you submit your initial full paper version, prepare it in two-column format, including figures and tables.

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