

# Example of women and power in shakespeare: the scheming versus the innocent criti...

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Shakespeare writes his play in an era where males are not accepting of women in power and authority. While the Elizabethan Age had Queen Elizabeth at the throne, many critics did not accept women in these positions readily. As a result, Shakespeare's works reveal women in both negative and positive ways. Males controlled aspects of the society such as power and authority while women were expected to be submissive or weak and follow the orders as stipulated by these males. This submission was important to their survival in the society and within their families. During the Renaissance period, the women were regarded as the weaker sex in physical strength and endurance. However, Shakespeare goes against these conventions in the roles of Goneril and Regan in King Lear. He offers them as aggressive and bold, yet he presents their sister as submissive. Other plays by Shakespeare depict these conflicting views, and include Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and Much Ado about Nothing.

Shakespeare presents the "bawdy" female characters that are "sexualized, cheeky and flirtatious" (Jamieson, n. d). They are depicted as the working class characters for example Margaret in Much Ado about Nothing. Their behavior is their appropriate to their low social standing, and the characters make use of sexual insinuations in conversations. In the Elizabethan era, these low class characters are able to get away with this behavior as there is no fear in losing their social standing. In direct contrast to the bawdy women, Shakespeare presents young innocent women as being brutal and once their innocence lost, they are killed to show this loss of innocence. These characters are normally of a high social standing, for example, Ophelia in Hamlet. Their upper class standing makes their downfall all the more

tragic. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is the typical “femme fatale”. She manipulates Macbeth and eventually leads both of them to deaths as she commits suicide and Macbeth dies at the hands of the people. Goneril and Regan, plan to gain their father’s fortune. As such they lie about their love for him in an effort to get what they want. It is their ambition that causes their deaths as Goneril takes her life after poisoning Regan. The plot to Much Ado About Nothing, Benedick eventually wins over the spirited Beatrice by saying, “Peace, I will stop your mouth.” While these women appear to be courageous, intelligent, and independent, they are eventually subdued by the end of the play.

Many of Shakespeare’s comedies end with marriage as the men are expected to take on the responsibility of these women. However, these are normally characters who are born into wealth such as Hero in Much Ado About Nothing. On the whole, the women in Shakespeare’s plays find themselves at the heart of accusations for adultery, and they suffer as a result of the accusations. Othello kills Desdemona after he doubts her faithfulness to him; Hero falls seriously ill when she is falsely accused by Claudio of infidelity. One can therefore conclude that the women in Shakespeare’s plays are often accused because of their sexuality even though they are faithful to their husbands and their intended husbands. This can be argued that the males feel threatened by their insecurities in regards to women’s sexuality suggests that they too are weak to their emotions. However, women are not fully free in Shakespeare’s plays. They are either properties of their husbands and fathers or even their employers. The women are depicted as having questionable morals. Gertrude in the play

Hamlet marries her husband's murdering brother and Lady

Macbeth encourages her husband to murder the king. For these women, the penalty for their scheming ways is death. These women in their roles serve as subtle critics of the Elizabethan era at the time. It leaves the reader to question the justice in the traditions at the time and attempt to understand the treatment of these women and how they respond to such treatment.

Lady Macbeth is a ruthless woman with a lust for power. After she commits these horrible acts of violence with her husband, something eventually breaks within herself. She cannot bear the thought of what she has done (that is killing Duncan), Once she faces the truth of her horrible act she falls apart and loses power, she commits suicide. Lady Macbeth dies in guilt.

Gertrude dies in innocent repentance after realizing her new husband had killed her deceased husband and had plans to kill Hamlet as well. Goneril and Regan die in shame, but Cordelia dies a hero.

The heroines in Shakespeare's work cover a wide range of strengths and weaknesses of the Elizabethan woman. These females show great intelligence and a strong sense of independence. As such, many critics see Shakespeare as an advocate of women's rights and as such his plays depict the issues surrounding their roles in the society and how they are treated in a male dominated world. However, there are those who see these women as being influenced by negative characteristics which lead them to adopt the strengths of men. One questions the purpose of creating these strong women who eventually become submissive. It can be concluded then that while Shakespeare believes in the strength of women there is the ultimate belief that the male is the superior being. Das (n. d) suggests that

Shakespeare delineates women characters in his plays. He shows the treatment of women in a male dominated society and their rise above the problems associated with the patriarchy of the society.

Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia in the play shows that his actions are largely a result of Gertrude marrying so quickly after his father's death. He finds it difficult to forgive Ophelia and cannot trust her completely. His love for his father and Gertrude speedy remarriage confuses him and he is unkind to Ophelia. As a result, Ophelia is a victim of Hamlet and the control of men in the society. Her father and brother dictate her lifestyle and are adamant that she should stay away from Hamlet. Her expected obedience reinforces the way women are expected to behave in the society. She disregards her feelings for Hamlet and is torn by her guilt when Hamlet hints that his madness is a result of her rejection. She believes that his feelings towards her are genuine, and she shows real sorrow in Act three scene one. Ophelia's grief heightens when she blames herself for her father's death at the hands of Hamlet and for Hamlet's madness. She goes mad without the guidance of the males in her life. At the start of the play, the reader sees her as strong willed as she pursues Hamlet without her parent's consent but this fleeting image passes as her actions are quickly stifled to reiterate the idea that women cannot make sound decisions without the influence of males.

In essence, the tragedy in Othello happens, as a result patriarchal rules that govern the society. Das (n. d) cites Greene in remarking on the fact that the tragedy occurs as a result of the men's misunderstanding of the women and the women's inability to protect themselves from the society. Desdemona's passive, soft and obedient nature can be contrasted to Othello's masculinity.

His aggressive nature and his jealousy, drives him to strike Desdemona. She tells Iago “ I am a child to chiding”. However, she is not equipped to deal with Othello’s aggression and he is not prepared to deal with her sexuality. As a result, she is helpless against Othello. She retreats into a submissive and childish character in order to hide from the realities of male control. This behavior is in direct contrast to the Desdemona that the readers meet at the start of the play. One can say that Desdemona is a strong character as she willfully marries a man of a different racial background in a society that shows prejudice.

Nonetheless, she manipulates the situation to suit herself as she justifies her actions to her father in Act one Scene three, that just as he mother had defied society’s conventions and married him, so too had she with Othello. Yet, she is quick to reassure him that she is also duty bound to him as her father. She does not make a choice between both men, but skillfully pledges her loyalty to both her father and her husband. With this cleverness, Desdemona appears to be obedient, even as she goes against his authority. Desdemona’s behavior is manipulative even towards Othello as she hints at her feelings towards him before her marriage. Her sexuality is used to her advantage but becomes the wife that society expects. She obeys his every whim and even in death she protects him as she tries to justify his actions. One could say that only a strong woman could rise to that situation, yet she is grounded and accepts her position as the weaker sex. Her death is unwarranted and in vain even though Othello attempts to justify his actions. He notes that he did not murder his wife out of malice but because he is simply a man who “ loved not wisely, but too well”.

Similarly, Macbeth depicts a strong and ambitious Lady Macbeth, who knows what she wants and allows nothing to stop her from achieving what her desires. Her inner desire drives her to want power and authority. This disrupts of the political world of the Elizabethan era at a time when the society was not ready to deal with females who wield power. She however stands by her husband Macbeth in his quest to become king (Act one, line twenty-five to twenty-eight). She echoes the elements of the Jacobean playwrights in her quest for complete power of the state. Her actions are destructive, to say the least, as she encourages her husband to kill the king. She goes against the conventions of the society and wields absolute power. Lady Macbeth becomes queen because of her insistence that Macbeth seizes the opportunity to become king. As such, one may say that Lady Macbeth is a negative representative of female ambitions and power within the Renaissance period and displays the attributes that were unnatural for women instead she displays the ruthlessness of a man. Her desire to be “ unsexed” shows the conflict in the unnatural unbalance between political desires and the female nature. The roles of males and females switch in the play and Macbeth is portrayed as the weaker sex. Lady Macbeth’s madness and eventual death is expected. Her evil deed warrants her death. Her death is the price she pays for her cruel actions.

In reading King Lear, the reader sees that Cordelia represents “ goodness”, while her sisters represent evil. Shakespeare skillfully weaves a world where good and evil struggle to survive. Lear’s daughters are different and their differences are made clear from the onset of the play. Lear, in his attempt to divide his kingdom, puts forward a love test to find out which of his three

daughters love him most and help him to decide how on the allocation of his kingdom. He intends to give the better portion to the one who loves him most. This manipulation forms the basis on his two older daughters react to the test. They reinforce the notion that children live what they learn.

These two daughters realize that their father has the need to boost his ego and they feed his ego. They recognize that in order to achieve their goals, they must become as devious as their father is, and seize the opportunity as Lady Macbeth does in Macbeth. They profess an unrealistic love for him, and this is what he wants to hear. However, his youngest daughter is virtuous and does not fuel his ego. She expresses her love in the best way she knows, and leaves the way open to love and accept others in her life. This type of love is not what Lear wants to hear and his wounded pride makes him disown Cordelia. He shows that the society demands honesty and virtue but cannot handle it in the end. He eventually banishes her and gives her nothing.

Cordelia shows that being good is a virtue, and such actions get rewards in the end. She gains her wealth and power as she marries into wealth.

However, her sisters prove to be the epitome of what is wicked and evil.

They inherit their father's wealth and ultimately go against all the teachings of females in the society. They turn their backs on their father and drive him to madness. He does not understand their actions, but the reader clearly understands their greed and their need for power and control. Goneril is the sister who craves power more than anything else. She controls her husband's actions. She is the male double of her father, but she is not above the female flaw of adultery. Both Goneril and Regan want Edmund and are at war with each other for his love and affection.



Goneril and Regan display an evil cruelty that surpasses all expectations of women in the Elizabethan era. Gloucester solidifies Shakespeare's notion that Goneril and Regan are demons and monsters and anything but human. In fact, they are the opposite of what society expects. Both Goneril and Regan are at the center of all the chaos and disruption of the state. The idea that women in the society can only bring disgrace is proven as one kills the other. Cordelia quietly restores this negative perception and restores the patriarchy. She restores as a balance between her sisters and the expectations of the society. In Scene four, Cordelia re-appears in the play. One would expect her to be angry at her father, but she shows him love and forgives him. She is a saint as she forgives him for his actions against her. Her sisters, Lear's favorites of all, turned their backs on him, yet, Cordelia should be the one to do this but she does not do so. Even though Cordelia has her own army she is not as hungry for power as her sisters. Her death is unwarranted as she represents the good that the society wants from people. At the same time, critics may say that the evil in society has so much control over good that it survives all boundaries. The role of women in the society is dismal as the three children die in the end.

Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* is the story of Beatrice, the niece of the wealthy governor, Leonato. She is close to her cousin Hero, Leonato's daughter, the two are not alike. Hero is "polite, quiet, respectful, and gentle", Beatrice, on the other hand, is spirited, sarcastic, and sharp-witted. Beatrice and Benedick, often have verbal battles and the reader realizes unlike many of the females of the era, Beatrice possessed a wit beyond her expected capabilities. It is implied that Beatrice shared a relationship with

Benedick, but it ended on a sour note. Afterwards, the two constantly compete to outdo one another with clever insults. Beatrice appears firm and sharp in her actions but she is just as vulnerable as the typical female. As soon as she overhears Hero talking about Benedick's love for her (Beatrice), she leaves herself opened to the "sensitivities and weaknesses" of being in love. Beatrice is one of Shakespeare's dominant and physically commanding female characters. She does not want to get married as she has not found the husband, who was her equal. She is not willing to relinquish her independence and submit to the desires of a controlling husband. When Hero has been humiliated and accused of violating her virtue, Beatrice explodes is furious at Claudio for ill-treating her cousin. She becomes annoyed with how Hero is treated and lashes out against the discrimination against women in the society. She wishes that she had been born a man, but accepts that this is not possible (Act four scene three).

Beatrice and Hero represent two separate idea of the path to female equality. Hero is symbolic of the fact that women were not much more than slaves to their male counterparts. They are pawns to the whims of their effective owners, first the father, and then the husband. Beatrice represents a step in a new path she makes her own decisions and speaks her mind. Shakespeare shows his feminist nature as he makes Beatrice more likable. He has Leonato criticize Beatrice for being too shrew-like to find a husband. However, Shakespeare keeps Beatrice as a second-class citizen by having her wish that she was born a man, rather than having her speak of being equal to men while remaining a woman. She serves to reinforce the need for fixed gender roles in the society.

Much Ado about Nothing paints a disturbing picture about the violent nature of revenge. When Beatrice asks Benedick to kill Claudio to prove his love, one is left wonder at her heartlessness, although the command is justified because Claudio needs to learn a valuable lesson. Hero does not speak of wanting revenge and this shows her weakness. It is doubtful that the thought even enters her mind. Beatrice wishes that she was a man, but Hero, with her feminine attributes and submissive nature does not have this desire, is the ideal Elizabethan woman. On the other hand, Beatrice wants find equality among the men, but is unable to take the necessary steps to achieve this goal. In the end, it is Hero who falls seriously ill even though her attitude represented the ideal woman. Throughout the play, Shakespeare makes hints at the war of the sexes. In regards to Hero and Claudio, Hero wins only one battle. Despite the fact that she is forced into submission, she is better than Claudio in the end because he was proven wrong. This victory is the one thing that Shakespeare allows Hero to enjoy as her character does not enjoy much freedom of will and speech in the play.

Beatrice is the stronger of the two cousins. She is intelligent and strong-willed, while Hero is easily manipulated by the people around her. She is weak and even as Hero attempts to sway her thoughts regarding Benedick. Hero does not show that she can think for herself. In fact, she does not follow through on the ideas that her personal ideas. Nevertheless, Hero and Beatrice are victims of the manipulation of the other characters in the play. However Beatrice takes the misinformation she hears about her choice to mean that she should follow the order she is given. This emphasizes the expectations that the women in the society. Beatrice attempts to change her

ways based on Ursula's comments in regards to Benedick . It is this aptitude to decide one's destiny that makes her different Hero.

In concluding, Shakespeare's plays present women as important characters who play important roles in the plot. The women are often the central medium in the drama that unfurls. In many cases, the women in power are treated with distrust by those they come in contact with. The other characters question their morality. Gertrude in the play " Hamlet" marries her husband's brother who commits murder and Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to murder the king for the crown.

King Lear's daughters, Regan and Goneril, vow their undying love for their father, but get rid of him after they receive their legacy. These women pay the price for such folly with their lives and also lose the power they craved. Nevertheless, there are innocent women in Shakespeare's plays and who become victims of their circumstances. The powerful, but tragic innocent women in Shakespeare's plays, Cordelia, Desdemona, Ophelia, and Hero are pure and innocent characters at the beginning of these plays. However, by the end of the play, they suffer tragically once their innocence and power is lost.

In comparison to his presentation of deceitful women in power, Shakespeare's treatment of young innocent women is equally brutal. For example, Othello kills Desdemona out of jealous rage and Hero falls terribly ill when she is falsely accused by Claudio in " Much Ado about Nothing". In " King Lear", Cordelia is exiled from her father's kingdom and from his love when she does feed her father's ego in proving her love to him, but she is the only one who truly loves him. When Cordelia returns to save her father,

she is killed. In “ Hamlet”, the innocent Ophelia commits suicide once she discovers her father was murdered by the man she fell in love with. One can conclude then, that despite the actions of these women they all face grave endings.

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