

Underrated Heroines of William Shakespeare: Cordelia and Lady Macbeth

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Abstract: Women in Shakespeare's dramatic works are the topic of great discussion coming from a long time among the Shakespearean scholars. It is believed that Shakespeare threw light on the status of women in the society of his time through his female characters. Some women characters of Shakespeare are cheeky and flirtatious such as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Margaret in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Some women are shown pure and chaste at the beginning but met with their destruction after losing their innocence such as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Some women characters are known for their devotion, kindness, beauty, and honesty such as Cordelia in *King Lear* whereas some are strong, ruthless, and ambitious like Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*. The present paper focuses on the two underestimated heroines of Shakespeare of all the time – Cordelia, a symbol of loyalty which ultimately leads to her downfall and Lady Macbeth, a dynamic character who changes over the course of the play and meets her tragic end.

Key Words: Women characters, society, kindness, powerful, intelligent, ambitious

As a legendary dramatist, William Shakespeare has created his own space in the literary world. Even centuries have passed and various trends originated at various intervals of time, his place is remarkable and undefeatable. Though this literary giant was active in his career only for a quarter century, he left an incredible works behind for the forthcoming generations to engage with. Hardly there may be any language left in the world in which his works are not translated. His dealing with universal human emotions like love, ambition, and envy left various readers around the world spellbound. Though Shakespeare made huge contribution to the evolution of the English language, his usage of phrases in his dramas even struck various hearts today. Not only he bagged many credits during his time, he too gave life to many actors of his time. During the Shakespeare's time acting was a profession only open to boys and men. Women may be acting elsewhere in Europe but they were not allowed to perform in public theatres in England until the beginning of Restoration era. Thus, the female roles were played by the boys with broken voices. One can estimate how it was so difficult to justify the female roles on the stage to the playwrights of Elizabethan times especially to the legendary dramatist of the time like William Shakespeare. But withstanding all the difficulties of his time, Shakespeare created a history with his female characters. To some critics his female roles are itself the evidence of his brilliance. The deeds of his female

characters result from a true confrontation with life as they discover what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal culture with self-control. The present paper aims to shed light on those sturdy and the most persuasive female characters of Shakespeare who have left unending impression on the minds of his audience.

Cordelia in *King Lear*

The Tragedy of King Lear, often shortened to *King Lear*, is one of the most famous tragedies believed to have been written by William Shakespeare between 1604 and 1607 – the time when King James VI, King of Scotland and England, was trying to convince English Parliament to approve the union of the two countries into one nation. It was King James VI who first used the term “Great Britain” to describe the unity of the Celtic and Saxon lands. It is loosely based on the mythological personality named Leir of Britain. *King Lear* is often considered as one of Shakespeare's greatest works that explore the themes of power, loyalty, madness, and the consequences of betrayal. The play starts with aged King Lear, the monarch of Britain, who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. In order to determine how much of the kingdom each daughter will receive, he decides to arrange a kind of test where he asks them to profess their love for him. Nevertheless, how the King's actions lead to tragic consequences for himself and his family is the remaining play about.

The two older daughters of King Lear, Goneril and Regan, immediately engage in their flattery and declarations of love for the King, but when the King's youngest daughter and favourite Cordelia's turn comes she simply replies – “Nothing”. To his great surprise when the King asks her again, she explains him that she is duty bounded towards him as a daughter and she loves him according to that bond just like any other child has towards her father. King Lear becomes very angry and declares that she will get nothing and divides his all share between his two older daughters. When the two suitors come to marry Cordelia expecting a large dowry and a share of the kingdom, Lear simply tells them that it is their interest of marrying her but they are not going to get anything they expect. One of the two suitors was the Duke of Burgundy, who immediately declines Cordelia. But the other suitor was the King of France, who accepts her. And she goes off with him. It takes time to King Lear in the play to understand how valuable and important the bond between father and child is. The two elder daughters after getting their share start showing their true colours (nature). They initially treat him showing their disregard towards him, and then with cruelty. At the end of the play, when he has been brought down to the level of a crazy beggar, it was Cordelia comes to his help.

Cordelia's chief characteristics that can be observed in the drama are devotion, kindness, beauty, and honesty. Though she appears at the beginning and at the end of the play, her role is of greater importance. She is the ideal daughter, the ideal woman, ideal in her

judgment and behaviour, serene and noble. When the Duke of Burgundy rejects her and begins to make a speech, she shuts him off kindly and with dignity:

Peace be with Burgundy!

Since that respects of fortune are his love,

I shall not be his wife. (Act1, Scene1, *King Lear*)

When King Lear is kicked out by the two elder daughters, far from being critical of her father's stupidity, she leads the French army to Britain to recuperate what her father has unwisely lost. Feminist scholars, on the other hand, argue that Cordelia is an unrealistic character. According to them, she is little more than a male fantasy. At the beginning, Cordelia resists her father's demands and declares her own identity. She refuses to give all her love to her father and withholds some of it to confer on her future husband. But by the end of the play, however, Cordelia's self-determination has disappeared. King Lear's primary dream of having a daughter's love all to himself is comprehended when King Lear and Cordelia go to prison together. After several hours of torture, madness, violence, King Lear loses his mind in the midst of the chaotic noise of a violent storm, but when he wakes up to the sound of music, he finds his daughter is at his side. She extends her hand towards him and raises him up. After coming back to conscious state of mind, King Lear understands the true meaning of the bond between a father and a daughter that what Cordelia spoke about at the beginning of the play.

Though King Lear and Cordelia spend their last moments locked in a prison, they become emotionally too close to their hearts. King Lear admits that though he became blind by folly and madness, he at last has gained the full insight of what is important to a father in life. He further adds by saying that politics and power are mere materialistic and what is utmost important in life is real love. Cordelia's reunion with her father marks the clear restoration of order in the kingdom and the victory of love and forgiveness over hatred and malice. It gives a deep pain to the audience when the brief moment of familial happiness makes the shocking climax of King Lear that Cordelia, the personification of kindness and high merit, sacrifice herself to the heartlessness of an unjust world - Cordelia is hanged in the prison and King Lear dies of a broken heart.

Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*

The Tragedy of Macbeth, often shortened to *Macbeth*, is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, estimated to have been first performed in 1606. It dramatises the violent and destructive psychological effects of political ambitions and power. Popularly known as Shakespeare's shortest and bloodiest tragedy, *Macbeth* tells the story of a brave Scottish general named Macbeth who receives a prophecy from a trio of evil witches that one day he will become King of Scotland. Macbeth, after a supernatural prophecy and the urging of his wife, Lady Macbeth, commits regicide, usurping the kingship of Scotland. As the result, he

lives in anxiety and fear. He comes to a stage in his life where he can't trust his nobles. Though he leads a reign of terror, he falls after getting defeated by his earlier supporter Macduff. If we keep all the characters at one side, Lady Macbeth occupies the most favourite place in the play and among the Shakespearean tragic heroines. According to some critics, she is often considered as the fourth witch of the play. She far excels other heroines in the Shakespearean world by her dignity, strength, and terror. She is a fitting equivalent to her husband and possesses the very qualities which her husband lacks in reality. Without her role in the drama one can't say the drama is full and complete; one cannot imagine the tragedy of *Macbeth*. No doubt, she is the guiding force behind her husband at least in the first half of the play. Until her death in the play she appears to audience as an ambitious woman like her male counterpart Macbeth. The only difference between her ambitions to that of her husband is that she is ambitious not for her personal sake but for her husband. But she is always depicted as the epitome of evil, and images of her appear over and over again in several cultures. Although she has some of the most bloodthirsty lines in the play, she is not quite Cruella De Ville. The response she gets from the male characters suggests that she is a young, sexually attractive woman and, indeed, in her effort to influence Macbeth, she uses every method at her dumping, including the employment of her sexual charms.

When the audience first meet her on the stage, she is already plotting Duncan's murder. At this earlier glance, one cannot deny from the truth that she is stronger, ruthless and ambitious than her husband. Critics opine that Lady Macbeth is actually fully aware of husband's mindset so she pushes him into committing murder. At one point in the drama she also wishes to not to be a woman so that she can perform the task of killing Duncan. It implies that she is a masculine soul inhabiting a female body. Macbeth finally kills Duncan when he was in deep sleep and from that moment their marriage begins to shatter. They both fall into their own guilty conscience and hardly speak to each other. When Macbeth becomes the king, he carries fear regarding his political enemies and go aboard on a reign of fright whereas Lady Macbeth spends lot of time getting attached to bed but unable to sleep peacefully and having nightmares. Act 5, Scene 1, better known as the sleepwalking scene in the play, is a significantly celebrated scene in *Macbeth*. It deals with the guilt experienced by Lady Macbeth, one of the main themes of the play. The scene opens with the gentlewoman talking to the doctor about lady Macbeth's sleepwalking. When they are engaged in conversation, Lady Macbeth appears as if she is in sleepwalking. She stops for a while and then rubs her hands together as if she is struggling to clean them. It looks like as if she is trying to clean her bloodstained hands. She then re-enacts the murder of Duncan. Audience here can easily guess that her mind is now overloaded with guilt. She is tortured by the memory of the crime and she tries to get rid of it, but in vain. Her conscience is rebelling against the unnatural evil that ambition has turned her into. She in a depressed condition, questions herself whether her hands will never be clean; she also laments that all the perfumes of Arabia even can't clean her guilt. When Lady Macbeth's sensitivity becomes a

weakness, and she is unable to cope, she at last kills herself, indicating her total inability to deal with the series of their crimes. Her last words were:

Oh light! Please take me! I deserve to die!

Now take me light! Now cover my darkness!

Oh woe is me! Oh fie! My life! My life! (Act5, Scene5, *Macbeth*)

No doubt, Shakespeare has done a great job by portraying such a significant female roles in his plays. Though some of his plays challenge the traditional ways of their behaving, few lay stress on man-woman relationship in the society. The women characters in Shakespearean dramas often try to fit in the society but in due process lose their identity and direction. Just like men, the female characters of Shakespeare too suffer with various dogmas of life. Hats off to Shakespeare, who brought out such a great dramas which deal with strong women characters of the time when England was in the hands of the female ruler, Queen Elizabeth I. It may not possible to him if Elizabeth I had denied her support to him.

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