TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN
SHAKESPEARE’S MAJOR TRAGEDIES

“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;……”

William Shakespeare, Macbeth
CHAPTER - III

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This chapter is significant from the point of view that it forms the crux of the study. It deals with an analysis of the women characters in the Shakespearean tragedies. The manner in which they have been portrayed by the great playwright is closely examined to know thoroughly how Shakespeare has treated his women characters. The characters are put through many perspectives of criticism and re-evaluated in terms of modern literary-theoretical stances. They are compared with the male characters created by the great playwright to analyse whether Shakespeare’s treatment of his women characters is any different from the way he has portrayed the male characters. The analysis is however limited to the major tragedies namely Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet, Othello, Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra.

“Tt would not be correct to say that Shakespeare attempts to represent all of the distinctiveness of the ideal Renaissance woman in all of his female characters but it is definitely correct to say that he introduces us to the female characters that go against the grain of the Elizabethan notion of what a woman should be. Shakespeare rejects
the impression of the passive female and introduces us to woman of intelligence, wit, power, and character.\textsuperscript{1} One writer of the Elizabethan era compared a woman with an education to a madman with a sword: "...you just couldn't tell what she'd do with it!" (ibid) Shakespeare not only provides some of his female characters with a sword, but shows that they can handle it quite successfully.

Before we study the characters, it is vital to provide a brief summary of these commonly held perceptions. A woman in sixteenth century England had no vote, few legal rights, and an extremely limited chance of an education, much less a job. Freedom enjoyed by an Elizabethan woman was granted, and taken away, by her husband. He was the prince with authority and supremacy, and his wife was the faithful, loving subject. Both the church and the state supported this premise of wifely inferiority and it got a further support from the law. When a woman married, she traditionally lost control over her property. Any legal loopholes that might have left some doubt as to women's inferior status were adequately filled in by the teachings of biology and the theory of the four humors, which stated that women's bodies had a greater proportion of the cold and moist humors. This meant that women were inactive, hesitant, and meek - fit to be controlled by men. When the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe died in 1601, his funeral eulogist praised him for "keeping his sons to their
*Studies and his daughters to spinning and sewing.*” As we will see in the four women we are about to examine, they hardly fit into this mould.

**Macbeth: the plot**

*Macbeth*, one of the greatest tragedies of William Shakespeare, was first written in 1606 and published in 1623. It is the shortest of all Shakespeare’s tragedies and is known only in the text which is believed to be the acted version at the Globe theatre. But the text is considered to be an improperly memorized copy by the scribes and disagreement continues over the significance of some passages. Shakespeare is well-known with King James’s obsession with witchcraft and could have read his Demonological theory. The historical *Macbeth* was recognized by the Scottish chroniclers George Buchanans and Jons Leslie and by Raphael Holinshed who state that Banquo, the general of King Duncan, was an ancestor of the stuart kings.

The opening scene introduces the three witches with their intention of meeting Macbeth, the general of King Duncan, who was sent by the king along with Banquo, another general, to suppress the rebellion in Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo meet the three witches on their way back from Cawdor. The first witch greets Macbeth as ‘the Thane of Glemis’ and the second one tempts him as ‘the Thane of
Cawdor'. The last witch puts him in the picture that he will be the future king of Scotland. To Banquo they offer less in direct terms: ‘Lesser than Macbeth, and greater’ and ‘Thou shalt get [beget] kings, though thou be none.’ The three witches disappear before they can be inquired more. Meanwhile the king’s messengers meet Macbeth and Banquo and tell that Duncan has made Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor. The prophesies of witches make Macbeth more ambitious to become the king of Scotland as he is a man of great ambition. Now Macbeth thinks of Malcolm, the legal successor to the throne as an impediment to his objective.

At Macbeth’s castle Lady Macbeth waits for his return. She reads his letter of the weird revelation but knows that her husband is a fearful man. When she learns that King Duncan will be a guest to them she decides to draw her husband to kill the king at that night. She tempts him through her evil words and in despair Macbeth murders Duncan by dagger but he is nervous. Lady Macbeth puts the blame on the king’s guards by smearing them with blood from the dagger. Macduff, the Thane of Fife, discovers the murder. King Duncan’s sons Malcolm and his younger brother Donalbaine flee the first son to England and the latter to Ireland. Macbeth ascends the throne.
Macbeth arranges the banquet and invites Banquo and his son Fleance. He plans the murder of Banquo, who would ‘(be) get kings’, and his son Fleance on the way. Murderers murder Banquo but Fleance manages to escape. Macbeth is haunted by the ghost of Banquo while giving the banquet to the guests. He meets the witches once again to know about his prophecy. First armed head appears and warns he must beware of the Thane of Fife (Macduff). The second bloody head appears and assures that he cannot be killed except by one ‘of woman born’. The last child with a stick appears and says that he will not be defeated until ‘Birnam Wood.... shall come against him’. Finally he is granted a vision of a line of kings and the last of them wears Banquo’s face. Macbeth orders the slaughter of Lady Macduff and all her children. Macduff joins Malcolm in England, where the prince is raising an army to attack Scotland.

Lady Macbeth is now deserted by her husband who blames her for his present condition that ‘his mind is full of Scorpios’ and gain ‘no more sleep’ as he murdered a man who was in sleep. She now becomes the victim of sleep-walking. She sleepwalks and talks of ‘unnatural deeds’. She opens the letter written by her husband and continuously washes her hands. She says “all the scents of Arabia
cannot wash this little hands” *(ibid)* as it smells of the blood of old king Duncan. She finally dies without the love and care of Macbeth.

When the invading army awaits, Macbeth secures Dunsinane castle near Birnam Wood where Lady Macbeth dies, while the soldiers of Malcolm and Macduff use branches of the trees of Birnam Wood to cover-up for their attack on the castle. Macbeth’s army is defeated but he, recalling the witches’ words, believes he himself was safe. But he gets killed by Macduff, one who ‘was not’ ‘of woman born’ *(ibid)* but was untimely ripped from his mother’s womb. Malcolm succeeds to the throne.

The good side of Macbeth’s character is brought into the greater importance. The second scene represents him as the characteristic heroic warrior, “Bellona’s bridegroom”. In Duncan’s eyes he is “a peerless kinsman”. There must be great capacities of honesty in the man of whom these images are spoken by those who should know him well. But these possibilities are disregarded by extravagant ambition and single weakness of will. With his ambition is joined an equally extreme imagination. On the positive side these two qualities, ambition and imagination, are the foremost presentation of his character. The one control in the earlier, the other in the latter part of the play; for the one brings about the crime which crowns his desires and leaves no more scope for ambition, and the
other is the chief device by which Nemesis takes revenge the crime. On the negative side his character presents a weakness of moral courage in opposite proportion to his physical courage, and a conscience that serves but to hamper his method by weak, broken conscience and to deprive success of such satisfaction as the scheming, merciless foul play of Richard III enjoys.

The irony of life places Macbeth in the middle of circumstances which seem intended to advance the success of evil. He has contemplated the crime before his first meeting with the Witches; and at that meeting he is already blushing with the pride of great triumph. Thus from his previous dreams of kingship and from his present realization of merit he is in a mental and moral condition especially vulnerable to temptation. The temptation comes in the way that would most demand to him. Intense imaginativeness makes him the easy prey of “supernatural soliciting”. The outcome of his first contact with this mysterious, external influence which complement so strangely with his inmost thoughts is profound. We see him “captivated” into one of those moods of abstraction and reverie in which, more than once in the play, he loses touch with the realities of the moment. Yet the influence of imagination soon works in the opposite direction to superstition. It paints with terrible brilliance the consequences of his contemplated act. Thus his whole “state of man”

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is shaken with the conflict of emotions and he would faint temporarily in paralyzed suspense. Events, however, are against him Duncan’s appointment of Malcolm forces a decision of some kind and Duncan’s coming provides the great opportunity.

**King Lear: plot**

**King Lear**, a tragedy by William Shakespeare, was first produced in c.1606, and printed in two different versions in quartos of 1608. It was published in the First Folio of 1623. The source of the play is the chronicles of Raphael Holinshed, who drew it from Groffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia*, in which the story of Lear and his daughters was first written down. The story of Gloucester, so vital to Shakespeare’s plot, is based on a tale in Sidney’s *Arcadia*.

The opening scene introduces the Earls of Kent and Gloucester and Gloucester’s bastard son, Edmund. Gloucester has more fondness for Edmund than for his legitimate son Edgar. Edmund has a deep bitterness of his half-brother, which he conceals, and is resolute to dispossess him.

Lear is King of Britain and is in his old age and wants to divide his kingdom among his daughters Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Goneril’s husband is Duke of Albany and Regan’s is Duke of Cornwall; Cordelia’s hand is wanted by both the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. Lear stupidly decides that the partition
shall be according to his daughter’s love for him. Goneril and Regan own their parts by using flattering words to please Lear. He rewards each a third of his kingdom and then turns to Cordelia, who replies, ‘I cannot heave my heart into my mouth’ and announces she loves her father as his daughter. King Lear is enraged and in his bad temper the old man partitions the left over third of the kingdom between Goneril and Regan. Kent warns the king for his foolishness; he observes that the truth lies with Cordelia. The furious Lear sends him out of the kingdom with a warning that if he is discovered within the kingdom after six days he will be put to death. Goneril and Regan are requested to preserve their father’s position with a hundred knights a month, in turn. The Duke of Burgundy removes his band, since Lear has refused Cordelia’s dowry, but the King of France loves her and marries her, though she has lost all her share of kingdom to her sisters due to the foolishness of her father. Goneril and Regan, each in their turn, make it clear that their old and determined father is not a welcome guest they would prefer to have in their castles.

Edmund tricks his father (Gloucester) into believing that his lawful son, Edgar, is however plotting his death. Edgar becomes a conspirator in the eyes of his father and assumes the disguise of an idiot, Poor Tom. Lear, meanwhile, has become annoying and irrat.
He has become a trouble at Goneril’s and Albany’s palace. Kent in disguise serves Lear and succeeds in gaining the old man’s confidence at once in serving to deal with Goneril’s impudent steward Oswald. Then Goneril makes it simple to her father that he and his knights and his fool are transforming the palace into something ‘more like a tavern or a brothel’. (ibid) Lear terminates his attendants and leaves in a fury; Goneril sends a letter to Regan to caution her. Regan also refuses to have Lear; they gather at Gloucester’s castle and Goneril turns up there too. Regan informs her father to send away half of his group and close his month with Goneril; but during the pandemonium it becomes clear that neither sister will have him - unless he comes alone. Lear curses both his daughters and rushes into the blizzard outside in the dark of the night. Gloucester is anxious about the behavior of the old man, who is now lost alone in the stormy night without any protection or help. Edgar finds him in a hovel with Kent and the fool, the cause of his fall. Gloucester reveals his discomfort to Edmund and mentions that action be taken. Edmund gives up his father’s confidence to Cornwall.

Gloucester discovers the king and directs him to the protection in the outhouse of his castle but later he has to bring caution that the old man’s death is being conspired. Kent and the fool and some of
Gloucester’s knights rush him away. Edgar considers anxiously on the events that have brought a king so low.

A French army has reached Britain and Albany. Goneril, Regan and Cornwall, are sure of Gloucester’s responsibility. When Oswald fetches news about Lear, caution has deserted Dover and ‘well-armed friends’, Regan and Cornwall have Gloucester jump and they question him; they blind him and ridicule him with the news that Edmund has deceived him on the health and gives him to the care of Poor Tom (Edgar). Gloucester pleads Poor Tom to take him to Dover; he does not know that the outsider is his son.

Cornwall dies of a wound inflicted by one of his servants who was shocked at the unsighted of Gloucester. Albany’s emotion gradually turns more cold towards the woman Goneril who is confirmed to be dead. Edmund thrives in draw the support of both Goneril and Regan. Lear for the moment has reached Dover- thanks to Kent - and Cordelia has come together with her father. Edgar takes his sightless father there carefully and on the way meets the wicked Oswald and kills him in a fight. He discovers that Oswald was taking a letter to Edmund from Goneril, advising him to masquerade of Albany. Lear for now has lost control of his mind: but he is cared for by Cordelia and he gets well.
Goneril with Albany and Regan with Edmund meet at the British camp near Dover; Goneril is envious to see Edmund with her sister. Edgar, as Poor Tom, moves toward the camp and gives Albany the letter Goneril sent to Edmund. Edmund himself, with the option of one sister who is widowed and one who may well be widowed, makes a decision to stop and notice, and he objects to Albany’s admirable move towards Lear and Cordelia, should they be overpowered.

The British army is triumphant and Lear and Cordelia are taken. Edmund gives the order for Cordelia to be slaughtered in her prison and is then tackled by Albany. Goneril and Regan are present and Regan is dying - Goneril has poisoned her. Albany deals with Edmund’s honour in a public competition and his champion is Edgar. Edmund is severely injured and Albany deals with Goneril with the evidence of her betrayal. Goneril kills herself and Edmund, dying, confesses his fault; he informs of the order to kill Cordelia to the Duke of Albany but it is too late for him to cancel it.

Lear obtains the body of Cordelia, observed by the others, who are traumatized into calm, ‘Howl, howl, howl, howl! Oh you are men of stones!’ (ibid) He identifies the true Kent and that is his only consolation- his foes have even killed his poor fool, who kept to him

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in all his tracks. He passed away of regret. Albany declares that the kingdom shall belong to Edgar.

_King Lear_ is most memorable for its Olympian poetry, which is one reason why many admirers of Shakespeare find it more satisfying on the page than on the stage. The title role is stunning and while most eminent actors perform well in that role in a variety of ways, it is strangely restricted of compassion in the theatre. The reason may be that Lear himself is a complex man to empathize with. The actor is given great chance to astonish; but very few to move the audience in the way the fool does, or poor unsighted Gloucester, who is also a victim of himself. The subplot, in an appealing way, is an important reinforcement to the major theme, with the cold blooded, wicked Edmund more in charge of events than anyone else.

The king, without the great poetry Shakespeare provides him, would be almost nothing. He would be a plain ordinary man. If one observes his play, in reality he is an outstandingly unintelligent old man. He forces impracticable proclamations from his daughters in the first scene and in reply is given words that only schemers could complete without shy; when the third daughter tells him the fact and he blows up in anger. His conduct is that of one who could never have agreed to love in his life - he has always had it as unconditional love as his owing and now he needs it, though it is manipulative and
calculated. Goneril and Regan conform to be a vicious pair - but with such a father their temperament is not hard to comprehend. After that, Lear does not so much drop as stumble in any mess: he goes off with ominous intimidation that are no more than threats: “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.” (ibid) Then he goes away into the night and the storm - and into meekness and recognition of human compassion, revealed first to him by a miserable, quivering fool. His belief that his two daughters loved him truly begins to fall. The poetry is what saves him from being simply unacceptable; but the change in Lear’s character on the stage appears to be obvious and credible but very subtle for recognition.

A significant construction is the character of fool, cynical and honest and as unadulterated as a dog. Shakespeare appears to overlook him after the words ‘And I’ll go to bed at noon’ (Act III Scene 6). The suggestion at the closing stages, Lear’s ‘And my poor fool is hang’d!’ (ibid) appears to answer for his vanishing but he has been out of the play for more than two whole acts by then and the line could refer to Cordelia as well.

*Othello: plot*
Othello, the Moor of Venice is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, and was first produced in 1604 century AD and printed in a quarto of 1622. It was published in the First Folio of 1623. The basis of the play is a story in the Hecatomithi of Giraldo Cinthio (1565).

The Venetian, Roderigo, and Iago, trusted soldier in the service of Othello, a general in the service of Venice, both are resentful against the Moor. Roderigo desired Desdemona, who has secretly married Othello, and Iago’s progress in the ranks has been set aside in favour of the youngest Michael Cassio, a Florentine whom Othello has made his lieutenant. Iago is cynically indignant: he has no more than the rank of antique as remuneration for his years of loyal service. Roderigo is an impractical man, easily prejudiced; Iago is sneaky and treacherous. They go, at Iago’s proposal, to provoke Brabantio, the Venetian senator, and inform him that his daughter Desdemona has run off and even now ‘an old black ram is tupping (his) white ewe.’ Iago then leaves the scene to Roderigo.

Brabantio commands the capture of Othello for snatching his daughter. Othello discards the charge: he loves Desdemona and she returns his love and Desdemona’s words stand out in all that she says. Unwillingly, Brabantio consents to the match, while news is brought that the Turks are trying to attack Cyprus. Othello sets off to
command the Venetian forces and his wife goes with him. Meanwhile, Iago has encouraged Roderigo to believe that he has a chance of gaining Desdemona - and of cuckolding Othello.

The chief characters are brought together in Cyprus: Othello and Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, and Iago and his wife Emilia. The Turks are conquered and Othello earns more respect. Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is fascinated by the handsome and youthful Cassio. Roderigo is easily convinced to fall in with Iago’s plan to dishonor the man. Cassio, who has no cause to doubt Iago, is willingly betrayed and motivated into apparently disobedient behaviour and Othello denies him because of his treachery. Iago gives advice to Cassio to appeal with Desdemona to arbitrate on his behalf and at the same time persuades Emilia that Cassio’s pleading should be heard. Emilia helps to convince Desdemona to act on Cassio’s behalf; the well-meaning and innocent lady promises to help.

Iago, with Othello, speculates audibly why Cassio should be with Desdemona. Othello pays no attention and with profligacy to her appeal for the lieutenant’s restoration. He can rebuff her nothing and promises to attend to the case. Iago refers again to Desdemona and Cassio: his suggestion is skilful enough to drive Othello suspicious and Iago grabs his chance to drive the seed of jealousy
deep and schemes at the same time to persuade Othello of his honest intentions. When Iago has left and Desdemona comes upon the scene he explains in his preoccupied manner by saying his head aches. Desdemona presents her handkerchief but Othello declines: 'Your napkin is too little.' Desdemona loses the handkerchief, which is found by Emilia. Emilia remembers that it was Desdemona’s first tribute from Othello; but Iago takes it from her before she can give it back to its owner. Then he puts the handkerchief with Cassio’s property.

Iago increases the force on Othello and incites him to the limit- 'Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore' (ibid) - but Iago tells of Cassio’s troubled sleep and the name of Desdemona on his lips - and what is he doing with a handkerchief that was surely Desdemona’s? And the next time Othello speaks to his wife she be adamant on demanding Cassio’s cause. Where is the handkerchief he gave her? She does not have it with her. Othello commands her to find it and bring it to him. Emilia is an uneasy witness to this scene.

Cassio has given his mistress, Bianca, a handkerchief he has found among his clothes, asking her to take the embroidery. Bianca, Iago perseveres, loves Cassio and wants to marry him. He persuades Cassio, in Othello’s hearing, to speak slightly of her regard, having led Othello to believe it is Desdemona they are talking about.
Then Bianca arrives on the scene and demands to know where Cassio got this handkerchief. It is unmistakably another women’s. Othello disgraces Desdemona in the presence of the Venetian emissaries and then cross-examines Emilia about his wife’s behavior; but that yields nothing for his doubts and he turns his wrath honestly on the bewildered and terrified Desdemona. Iago sets Roderigo to kill Cassio but the plan goes twisted and Iago kills Roderigo in order to stop him from speaking.

Emilia, sets off to Othello to tell him of the disturbance, arrives to discover that he has killed Desdemona. She was, explains Othello, betraying him with Cassio: Iago told him so. The disgusted Emilia calls the Venetian emissaries, who arrive with Iago, and Emilia tells the truth about the handkerchief and what she now makes out is her husband’s betrayal. Iago kills her and achieves to an extent in escaping from the chamber, but he is brought back as prisoner and the wounded Cassio also. Letters have been found on Roderigo’s body that hooks Iago beyond a shadow of a doubt. Othello, his spirit broken beyond recovery, kills himself.

“Of all Shakespeare’s great tragedies, Othello is the most prominent for its sorrow.”(Bradley, 94) Othello himself is a great creation, an honest man willing to believe in honesty. His love is complete and it is painful to see it breaking down. He believes Iago
is truthful and Desdemona factual; there is nothing to show him that
Iago is sham but he is shown many reasons for believing Desdemona
is treacherous. His distress, as Coleridge observed, lies in ‘the
struggle not to love her’. If he loved her less he could discard her,
though not without pain; it is the fall from elegance that tears him to
pieces. And just as Othello is an honest man Iago is a mean one to
the depths of his soul; he knows very well how envy and disbelief
can be made to work.

Shakespeare has depicted radiantly a man who has felt the
bitterness of jealousy every day of his life. The Character of
Desdemona and Emilia are surpassed by Othello and Iago but they
are remarkable. Desdemona is just the kind of temperate and
straightforward girl who would love the truthful and great-hearted
Moor and strong-willed enough to marry him in the face of parental
dissatisfaction. Emilia is a passive character for the first half of the
play, but she remarkably bounces back and is a completely rounded
woman, into the action at Othello’s suggestion to her husband: ‘Ay,
twas he that told me on her first. An honest man he is, and hates the
slime that sticks on filthy deeds.’ Emilia had uncertainties enough
about the man she married; she has no doubts now and nothing will
stop her from revealing the truth.

Hamlet: plot
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, and was first produced 1602 century AD and printed in a quarto of 1603. An enhanced quarto followed in 1604, and it was published in the First Folio of 1623 as The Tragedy of Hamlet. The Folio text holds some exclusion. The source of the play was the Gesta Donorum, a 13th century history of Denmark in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus. The name Hamlet was evolved from the original Amleth, and the story was also known from the Historie Tragiques (1559) of Francois de Belleforest. Scholars believe in the continuation of another play on the subject known to Shakespeare but long lost. Hamlet is the classic example of revenge plays and he is in debt to Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy.

The night watch of the royal castle at Elsinore has seen a vision of the late king and, fears its re-emergence and tells Horatio, Prince Hamlet’s friend. Horatio comes to see for himself. The ghost appears again but Horatio’s endeavors to communicate with it go for nothing; when the cock crows the apparition disappears.

Hamlet, the late king’s son, has seen his father’s brother Claudius marry his mother, the widowed Gertrude, and succeed Hamlet on the throne. The offensive alacrity of his mother’s remarriage has surprised Hamlet and he will not react to the blandishment of Gertrude and Claudius. Horatio brings Hamlet news
of the ghost of his father and he goes with him to the ramparts that night. They hear the sound of carousing in the castle, carried on the bitter wind. The ghost comes and makes a gesture to Hamlet: his friends implore him not to go with the ghost but he does and learns of his father's murder: Claudius brain washed Gertrude and poured poison into his brother's ear while he slept in the orchard. Claudius must pay; as for Gertrude, 'leave her to heaven.' The ghost disappears and Hamlet promises his friends to confidentiality.

Hamlet's path is clear but he is frayed between his responsibility and his own nature, which is meditative and undetermined: under the weight of what he knows and what he should do, he is questioning every facet of human relationships. The court believes him to be mad, a belief he supports to stop Claudius from suspecting him. Ophelia, daughter of the old counselor Polonius, was once courted by Hamlet; now he treats her rudely and it is implies that she is the cause for his mad behaviour. Claudius and Gertrude ask two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch Hamlet's behaviour and keep them conversant.

A troupe of players comes to Elsinore and Hamlet trains them in a play to be acted before the court. 'The Murder of Gonzago' replicates the murder of Hamlet's father and Claudius deceives himself. He decides to send Hamlet out of Denmark and hires
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany him. Hamlet comes upon his uncle who, overcome with regret, is on his knees at prayer. He could kill him easily but he persuades himself that is not the time; he will wait until Claudius is again taking pleasure in the consequences of his actions, not regretful of them. He goes to face his mother, but Polonius is there, suggests that Gertrude meet her son. The old man hides himself behind the arras when Hamlet enters.

The scene that follows is one of the most famous in all dramas. Hamlet’s aggressive attack on his mother is led by her fear that Hamlet means to harm her. Her cry for help provokes a response from the hidden Polonius and Hamlet stabs him through the arras, believing it is Claudius hidden away there. Then he turns on his mother and brings her to tears. The ghost of his father appears- but it is only visible to Hamlet. Gertrude is certain her son is mad.

Claudius is determined to kill Hamlet. He sends him on an assignment to England, where the murder can be carried out; but Hamlet meets a pirate ship and a letter to Horatio proclaim that he will soon be back in Denmark. Meanwhile, Hamlet’s behaviour and the murder of Polonius have brought true madness to the unfortunate Ophelia. Claudius makes it plain to Laertes, Ophelia’s brother, who is responsible for the murder of his father and madness of his sister. When Ophelia sinks into her fanatical wanderings, Laertes promises
vengeance on Hamlet, who returns at this time to witness the funeral. Claudius has a friend now, to help rid him of Hamlet.

A formal duel is arranged, with rich prizes, between Hamlet and Laertes. Laertes makes use of a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup is ready to be handed over to Hamlet if he wants to drink. The duel begins and Laertes wounds Hamlet; then, in a wrestle, Laertes falls and each picks up the other’s weapon. Hamlet wounds Laertes. Gertrude, meanwhile, has taken the cup planned for Hamlet and, before Claudius can stop her, has drunk from it. She falls, poisoned, and Laertes, knowing he is dying, tells Hamlet the truth. He warns him he, too, is dying from the poisoned blade. Hamlet’s last act is to kill the king.

*Hamlet* is the most talked about play ever written and will perhaps go on providing the material for thesis and books of scholarly research for as long as English is read and the plays are performed. The difficulty of the play is designated by this and as a dramatic exercise it is limitless. The tragedy lies in Hamlet himself, a character express in his inspection of himself. He is not a hero, beyond his position as the chief character; he is simply not equal to the massive responsibility laid upon him and his merciless self questioning results from that. If he were firm he would have killed Claudius at the first opportunity but then he would have not been a
subject for Shakespeare’s amazing brilliance. He does not even motivate our pity; that is reticent for the dejected, confused Ophelia and, against reason, for the responsible and miserable Gertrude. Hamlet is a man of sensitivity with an enquiring mind who, with the revelation from his father’s ghost, is inclined into circumstances in which everyone, except his dull and well-intentioned friend Horatio, is a stranger, because the whole world is now out of focus. And a man like Hamlet cannot but examine this out-of-focus world. He is not essential into action until he unintentionally kills Polonius and after that he is simply defensive himself. He would have made a very bad king, one can’t help feeling. The play can be seen a dozen times and still leave the viewer with the feeling that there is something more about it to be revealed.

**Julius Caesar: plot**

*Julius Caesar* is a historical play written in 1599. The main source is Plutarch’s *Lives of Caesar, Brutus and Antony*. It is available in translation of Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.

Caesar returns to Rome victoriously after defeating Pompey, his son-in-law, another general and an ardent rival. Roman people or the Plebeins welcome him but Tribunes see danger in the rise of him and are loyals of Pompey. A political conflict grows. A soothsayer
warns Caesar 'beware of ides of march'. vii Conspirators along with Cassius made a plan to assassinate him. They conspire under Brutus’ leadership, who is a great friend of Caesar. Caesar’s wife Calphurnia dreamt ominous dreams. She begs him not to go to senate on 15th of March. When he stays at home the words of Decius Brutus made him out. At the capitol he was under the seize of conspirators and was stabbed to death. Mark Antony came and requests the conspirators to allow him to speak at Caesar’s funeral. He gets the permission even after the protest of Cassius. He makes an emotional and inflammatory speech. The common people are enraged and violence sets in. Cassius, Brutus and their loyal followers flee for their lives. Octavius Caesar, Antony and Lepidus form the triumvirate and begin to rule Rome. The combined forces of Octavius and Antony go after Brutus and Cassius. Fearing capture and humiliation both commit suicide in the end.

**Antony and Cleopatra: plot**

Antony and Cleopatra was written about 1606 and published seven years after the death of Shakespeare. It is the subject of the love of the famous and powerful roman for the traditionally beautiful Egyptian queen Cleopatra forced by political events and the death of his wife Fulvia in Rome, Antony leaves Cleopatra in Alexandria and goes back to Rome. For political reasons he marries
again the sister of his former opponent, Octavius Ceaser, Octavia. Unable to live away from Cleopatra, he soon leaves Rome and Octavia and returns to Alexandria.

This causes war between Rome and Egypt. The Egyptians fleet is also defeated at Alexandria. Cleopatra takes refuge in her monument and there is a false rumour that she is dead. Hearing this, Antony tries to kill himself. Failing he is carried to Cleopatra’s monument where he dies in her arms. Octavius, leading the roman forces, tries to make peace with Cleopatra. She pretends to agree, but has secretly decided to kill herself. That she does by putting an asp to her breast and dies.

After the general introduction to the tragedies that have been selected for the research, it is now appropriate to examine the women characters of these plays in detail. The study of these women characters in the tragedies of Shakespeare is the focus of this research.

Lady Macbeth

We shall begin with Lady Macbeth who can be described as a formidable version of a woman who dominates her weak-willed husband. However, it would be wrong to consider her as a monster. On the contrary, she is perhaps more than usually feminine. She is conscious of her woman’s breasts, her mother’s milk; knows “How
tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me''vii and when she thinks to carry out the murder herself, fails because Duncan reminds her of her father. That is ample proof that she is a woman with a gentle and human heart too, unlike the belief held contrary to it. Macbeth calls her his dearest "chuck", and she speaks, when sleepwalking, of her "little hand". In other words she can be described as a woman who was feminine as well as masculine, who was good as well as evil.

It is apparent from the moment we meet Lady Macbeth reading her husband’s letter that she is not going to conform to the role of a submissive woman. When she cries out to the spirits to "unsex" her, and when she brags that if she had vowed to do a murder she would follow through, we see that she does not conform to the ideal of the caring and nurturing woman. She says even if it were her own baby she “…would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, / and dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this.”(ibid)

The originality and self-control of Lady Macbeth throughout the play is astonishing, and barely resembles the character of a delicate woman. It is only in private that she shows her fatigue, and only after her nervous breakdown that she relents control. However, this does not negate the supremacy and strength that she has revealed up to this point.
Shakespeare presents the conflicting character of Lady Macbeth. Upon receiving her husband’s letter about the witches’ prophecies, she attempts to be like a man in order to exude the strength needed to gain additional social status as royalty. Lady Macbeth appears to be very influential in planning – deciding when and how they should kill King Duncan – and chiding her husband for not acting more like a man; yet, despite these capabilities, she is the main reason for the revealing of the Macbeth’s part in the usurpation of the throne. First shown as an iron willed character willing to “pluck my nipple from my child’s boneless gums. And dash the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this” to latter being shown as possessed by nightmares of guile (I.vii), how could such a strong character so quickly fall prey to uneasiness? According to materialist feminism theory, despite her earlier show of strength, Lady Macbeth’s eventual weakness is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender.

A popular speculation on why the oppression of women is not more commonly recognized than the oppression of certain ethnic or religious groups, is that
“Women allegiance to men from their own [background] always supersedes their allegiance to women from different classes” (Tyson 97). viii

While certain social and economic factors separate people from different walks of life, within these groups women are also separated from each other. Women remain isolated which prevents them from making significant changes because they have no strength in size. Similarly, Lady Macbeth, while being notably strong compared to other members of her gender, has no way to enact her schemes as she is kept isolated from other women during the course of the play. While her strength is great, she is not powerful enough alone to deal with a murder. She does not reveal the secret of their murderous deeds because she is a woman and thus inherently weak, but she reveals the secret because she is a woman and thus has been selectively isolated from finding strength in number.

From the very beginning of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is shown as a character who relents in creating rebellious plots. According to Lois Tyson,

“women [invest] themselves… in the accomplishments of their husbands and sons”. (ibid)
Lady Macduff – the epitome of motherhood – does not concoct some evil plot because she invests all of her intellectual powers into the achievements of her husband and children. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth, not as bound to domestic duties as Lady Macduff, sharpens her intellectual capabilities for her own use. While intelligence from a male character would be seen as a beneficial trait, patriarchy defines Lady Macbeth’s intelligence as a flaw and as an indicator that she is unnatural and ‘unfulfilled’ as a woman. Patriarchal society encourages Lady Macbeth to invest herself in the role of mother. Lady Macbeth is seen as selfish and abnormal when she confesses that there is a situation in which she would “dash her child’s brains out” (I.vii), a very unnatural statement according to patriarchy’s belief that women’s desire to have and protect children is a part of ‘their natural biological makeup’ (ibid). Though intelligent and strong at the beginning of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is reduced to an insignificant person haunted by nightmares and guilt as a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender.

*Macbeth*, is the Tragedy of ambition and can be said is the least complex of Shakespeare’s tragedies. It is clear by the absolute simplicity of theme, motive and treatment which companion with the simple, unsophisticated period of the events. Still, “Tragedy of
Ambition" seems a true and sufficient description of the play, to this extent at least, the ambition is the main-spring of the action. Ambition alone calls into operation the forces that bring about the central action and its train of fearful results. In Macbeth himself it is selfish ambition, the ill-equipped passion to have what is not his, conscious self-seeking that acknowledges itself to itself and gives out the dishonesty and self-deception in the man. In Lady Macbeth it is selfless ambition, a more persuasive, a deadlier, encouragement born of love and mistaken self-sacrifice. And in each the working of this passion, however different its origin, is the same, viz, the ruin of a nature not sufficiently expert of better things. For neither is "friend-like": else they were not tragic figures at all; their fall would touch us with no sense of the "pity of it", their fate in all its terror of long-drawn anguish and disgraceful death would blend no sympathy.

The struggle in Macbeth's soul starts anew, and now his wife interferes, with her dreadful resources of vice pressure. Still, imagination once more gives a warning and holds him back, and conscience and caution unite their voices in the warning. The victory over ambition and even his wife's influence seem gained: he will "proceed no further" in the "business", and "stop on the edge". But Lady Macbeth is not to be abstracted from the purpose which, recommended formerly by him, has enthralled her. And now their
very love becomes a curse to him: what should have been to his advantage is turned into a chance of falling. For knowing his character, on its weak side at any rate, and knowing her power over him, she scruples not to use her knowledge and power to the full, playing on every motive of temptation and provocation which a hurried brain and pitiless determination can suggest. Against such urgency, stronger than the "supernatural soliciting" itself, he cannot hold out. The iron will masters the undetermined will, sweeps aside scruples and fears, and bears him forward on its resistless present. The crime which originated in the promptings of ambition is completed, and ambition as a dramatic purpose of the tragedy is exhausted. Hereafter imagination is the ruling drive. From the moment of Duncan's murder to Macbeth's latest breath imagination gives him no rest. At first, indeed, when the disaster calls for instant action, the instinct of complete self-preservation declares its influence. Macbeth shows much of his soldierly capacity for action, and plays his part well; saves for the temporary urge which makes him murder the grooms and thus rouse needless suspicion. But when the immediate threat is over and the time for evidence has come, then we see him self-tortured into an anger of conflict and unjustifiable crime.
The turning point of the plot may appeal to be Banquo’s murder, in that it precipitates Macbeth’s downfall. Till that point events have played into his hands; he has won the crown, and the escape of Malcolm and Donalbain has left him in undisturbed ownership. But now everything goes against him. The relationship of the second murder changes to conviction men’s suspicions as to the cause of the first, at the banquet scene and he deceives himself hopelessly, and his thanes are driven to flee or to measures of self-defense. Thus the murder of Banquo marks the decline of Macbeth’s destiny; it is the beginning of the end. But the end was unavoidable, whatever the steps towards it. Everything that follows the murder of Duncan is the direct outcome of it. If Duncan had lived so would have Banquo. The first crime changed the whole course of Macbeth’s work. It is the real separating line, the crucial turning-point, the parting in life’s war. And the fact is expressed in his words.

“The Rubicon of crime” once crossed the character interest changes. Hitherto, as regards Macbeth, it has stretched out in study of the struggle within his soul. We have watched the imbalanced conflict between the good and the evil in him, the one supported by his scruples and fears, the other by his ambitious desire, by the involvement of “fate and metaphysical aid”, and by his wife’s encouragement. Now the contest gives place to a hideous consistency
and singleness of purpose. "Things had begun to make strong
themselves by ill" is his watchword and practice. For imagination,
which once almost availed to hold him back from the deed, now
works through his conscience and still more through fear, and
stimulates him on to effect the removal of any in whom it sees a
possible avenger of Duncan and aspirant to the throne. Macbeth's
peace of mind is poisoned and the poison decays his whole being.
The successful triumph of foul play has not brought an instant's
pleasure to him or his wife. Existence becomes a restless ecstasy of
lasting fancy and warnings. Macbeth, who could with complication
and crookedness compel himself up to the first dreadful deed, and
only did the second in a fit of fury and fear, gradually becomes the
intentional contriver of murder, and soon overtakes to the third stage
of blood-thirsty rejection. Banquo, the more favoured of the Weird
Sisters, is his chief dread and falls his speedy victim; but blood-
steeped vision causes the inexpressible avengement of that vision at
the feast. Driven into deeper nervousness, Macbeth must know the
worst, by whatsoever means, and seeks stimulation of the Witches.
Their prophecies instill a "security" that does but boost his wild
disobedience of heaven and humanity. Reasonably, his credulity
should hold back him from the crimes that mangle daily cries of
distress from his bleeding land; they are meaningless, causeless
savagery in one who rests his trust on riddles that seem impossible of 
realization against him. But Macbeth has passed far beyond the 
appeal of reason. Bloodshed has become a mania (“some say he’s 
mad”), restless action the very condition of his being.

At length all the normal relations and interests of life have no 
reality in his eyes. Intolerable gloom settles down on him. He learns 
of his wife’s death with complete insensitivity, it merely reminds an 
outbreak of fatigue and disapproval for survival itself. One thing 
alone he seizes fast with blind harassment, his belief in the Witches’ 
invented reassurance of his protection. But at last the truth which 
Banquo divined from the first is enforced upon Macbeth and he sees 
these manage beast in their true light. Naught now remains to him 
but the animal instinct that clings to life:

They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly. 
But, bear-like, I must fight the course.⁹

And this world-sated crook had been “the brave Macbeth”, 
“Bellona’s bridegroom”, “the peerless kinsman!”(ibid)

Lady Macbeth, the Clytemnestra of English tragedy, is 
naturally drawn as a frustrated wife to Macbeth. She possesses “a 
terribly determined will”, (ibid) an iron stability of resolve. It is to 
her what imagination is to Macbeth, the feature that transcends and 
dominates all others in the character. It is the secret of her influence
over him and of her success in winning him to consent. It enables her to carry her share in the plot through, to remedy his errors, and come to his rescue in the great crises of the action. But it proves her ruin. It makes her impose upon herself and bear, for a time, a strain beyond the ultimate endurance of the rest of her powers. In fact, her imperious will, like his excess of the imaginative faculty, disturbs the proper relation of the forces of character. An abnormal element that knows no restraint of conscience or common prudence, that reeks nothing of foresight or fear, it is the source of abnormal efforts, the reaction from which wrecks the whole fabric. She has extreme self-reliance, unlike Macbeth, who turns instinctively to her for cooperation, until his sense of menacing retribution substitutes its fatal stimulus. Intellectually, too, she is Macbeth's superior, as Portia is the intellectual superior of Bassanio, and Rosalind of Orlando. With what dexterity she meets Macbeth's reluctances to go further in the work and assails his weak points: how swiftly she perceives - too late - the effect of the deed on Macbeth; what resource and alertness of brain is brutalised by crime, her finer spirit is broken by the reaction from moral self-violence.

Lady Macbeth and Hamlet stand apart from the rest of Shakespeare's creations in the intensity and perplexity of the interest they arouse. "Of all the women Shakespeare has drawn, none
exercises so strange a fascination (not even the “serpent of old Nile”) as this fragile, indomitable northern Queen, who makes the great denial - denial of her sex- and greatly suffers, even to the death.”(Dowden, 93) Lady Macbeth is ruined from within; her dream for her husband, accelerate by his letter, on time the murder and in the carrying out of it she does not give up weakness by a single tremble, knowing that if she does her husband will never gain out their plan. Nothing points the way to her mind’s bother but it is finally realistic in the brief scene that show it; she has lost her hold on the dreadfulness she has tried to manage (‘Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?’). Macbeth’s nature keep him harassed to the end (‘Yet I will try the last’), even though he accepts that ‘Life’s but a walking shadow...a tale told by an idiot...’ (ibid) as he is the man of ambition.

DESDEMONA

It is only relatively recently that the character if Desdemona has been accorded the kind of critical attention always received by the two leading male roles. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were many who shared Thomas Rymer’s distaste at the very fact of her marrying a black moor. Even Coleridge was taken aback by a noble Venetian lady’s choice of ‘a veritable negro’ for a husband; and other critics, less restrained, were convinced that
she was ‘little less than a wanton’, or ‘strumpet-like’, or a moral coward lacking in any self-respect. Modern versions of such disapproval have been less extreme and the range from B. Spivack’s\textsuperscript{xi} odd conviction that Cassio and Desdemona are really in love with one another to Auden’s belief that ‘given a few more years of Othello and Emilia’s influence...she might well, one feels, have taken a lover’.

However, such anti-Desdemona opinions are an exception rather than the rule. As Marvin Rosenberg\textsuperscript{xii} has noticed, she has more frequently during the present century been ‘in grave danger of being canonized’. As early as 1904 A.C. Bradley\textsuperscript{xiii} had started the dehumanizing trend with his opinion that she is ‘ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint’; and others have followed his example, transforming her variously into the world of the spirit that Iago wishes to destroy, or a life-force for order, community, growth and light, or goodness and purity personified, or the supreme value of love.

In a general way all these opinions depend on our seeing Desdemona’s life in the play as being dependent on how we view Othello - on our assuming that she is, although in a very different way, as dramatically dependent on the hero as Iago is. But, as a recent writer has stated, ‘the significance of the play is deepened by
what is shown in her individual inner experience to be - especially
what it shows in her love for Othello and her ways of responding to
him throughout the action. When taken as a person in her own right,
Desdemona may be seen to have a more complex character than she
was credited with in earlier criticism, the principal lineaments of
which are already clear. Her sexuality is directly faced and stress is
laid upon 'her sensual attraction to Othello, which she never thinks
of denying' and which is the part of her nature that makes her
powerfully gorgeous and eye catching to all the men in the play. The
independence of spirit that leads her to defy society's conventions, to
be half the wooer, and to beg before the full Senate for permission to
accompany her husband to Cyprus is seen to be the same strong point
in her that 'enables her to tolerate the public humiliation of a blow, to
insist to raging Othello that she is indeed honest, and to argue her
innocence with considerable passion'. Even her ability to deceive her
father is interpreted as evidence of the amazing control over her true
feelings which she later exercises on the beach, and on public
occasion and in private encounter in the final scenes.

The two chief aspects of this 'new' Desdemona that force a
reconsideration of her role in the moral scheme of the play are the
particular qualities of her innocence and her love. Both are connected
with a sexual selfless-consciousness which is 'neither an ignorant nor
a repressed state of mind’ but is ‘the mark of her absolutely positive moral standing when contrasted with sexually self-conscious, self-torturing and destructive personalities of her persecutors. Her love is something larger than the helpless affection found in most traditional accounts. Her relationship with her husband is every bit as all-embracing as his love for her. It is ‘more crucial to her than her life; and in recognizing that she cannot exist without his love, accepting her death is the only way she has of being circumstanced, shutting herself up to Fortune’s alms, by a king of suicide’. For this seventeenth-century feminist a tragic death is preferable to relinquishing responsibility for her own life.

Visually and symbolically the opposition of black and white is at work. And this is explored in all its variants: evil and good, deceit and fairness, illusion and reality, ignorance and knowledge, dishonesty and honesty, hate and love, death and life. These polarities, however, are not offered as a series of defined alternatives that this listing suggests; rather, all the terms are dramatically and poetically redefined. Iago is perceived by everyone as ‘honest’ which in actually means ‘dishonest’; Desdemona appears to Othello to be ‘unchaste, but in reality ‘honest’. Physically Othello is black like the devil, yet it is beneath the skin of Iago that the real devil lurks. But then Desdemona’s whiter skin then is not the sepulchre concealing
her dishonour but the symbol of her purity and Iago’s seductive
display of rationalism is not the divine function of the honest but a
perversion. It is instead Othello’s instinctive response to life that is
always ‘reasonable’.

Just as such usually accepted absolutes are questioned by a
profound quibbling so that the distinctions between them become
blurred, so the characters are seen as being not made up of well-
deﬁned strengths and weaknesses. The personal qualities are good or
bad, strong or weak only in accordance with the characters they are
used in. Othello’s immense capacity for total personal commitment
to his love leads him to make romantic love the cornerstone of his
marriage and his existence but this same characteristic causes him to
react violently to the belief that he was wronged. All his outstanding
professional virtues become parodies of those qualities when he
draws on them to solve problems of a personal relationship. Decision
becomes rash action; emotional engagement turns into ruthless
obsession; active response to crisis is transformed into a capacity for
murder. Similarly Desdemona: independence of mind emerges as
stubborn persistence; joyful conﬁdence leads to dangerous
interference in her husband’s professional life; her precludes any
anxiety of evil until it is too late; her responsibility for her own fate
turns into something perilously close to mess and most horrifying of
all, a love that transcends all ordinary limits results in submissive acceptance of death at its loss.

The whole play is based on the different ways a single object may be comprehended because of divergent human perspectives, interpretations and natural prejudice. In Ordinary lives it is difficult to maintain black-and-white divisions in any of the beliefs by which we order our lives. Circumstances demand the modification of our ideals, conditions force upon us reduced aspirations and narrowed expectations. We know that each time we make such an adjustment we are parting with the part of ourselves. Yet we hope even as we make the inevitable compromise it does not entail the destruction of the ideals involved. But the tragic hero is not ordinary. He is someone who is willing to live out the truth of his being regardless of the consequences; and for this attempt he pays the full price.

The subject of Othello is the possibility of full self-realisation within the context of personal relationships. This is what makes it the most private of the great tragedies and eventually accounts for an audience’s sense of association in it of the sort that the stage history illustrates. To complain of its lack of supernatural reference or its limited metaphysical range is to miss the point. Lodovico’s command - ‘The object poisons sight; / Let it be hid’⁴⁴⁴ - is the only possible end, because the arena for that struggle the protagonists
have lived through is best symbolized by the curtained bed. The complex relationship between Othello, Iago and Desdemona releases the creative and destructive forces inherent in the human situation; but it does so in a way that affects no one but themselves.

Some circumstances around the accused bride in *Othello* resemble those in *Much Ado about nothing*, but they do not lead to a happy ending in what is usually called Shakespeare’s most domestic tragedy, a treatment of marriage as both erotic and spiritual union.

Similarities between Othello and Iago are many, most notably an incapacity to believe in a woman’s true worth and a involvement in obsessive testing, the arguments of folktales and romances about accused wives and queens that often focus on men. Desdemona is neither angel nor devil, the stringent possibilities in Othello’s mind; Iago’s bestial imagery and generalization of women as whores, his verbal abuse of his wife and assumption that she has no autonomy, as well as his suspicions of cuckoldry, mark him as a man without a sense of worth. Iago’s early statement, “*Were I the Moor I would not be Iago. / In following him, I follow but myself... I am not what I am*”, (ibid) supports a view that Shakespeare dramatizes the conflict between the ideal and vicious in a single personality by separating the qualities into two characters. In romance the ideal prevails, but the sinister and unredeemed dominate in *Othello*. The closeness of
twins in romance is recalled with Cassio, who is casual and confident as Othello and Iago are not. The imagery of Othello’s firm dismissal, “Though he had twinned with me, both at a birth” (ibid) echoes the twins separated from accused queens in romance. Cassio is guilty of drunken fighting but regretful; he survives to become Governor of Cypress after Othello’s death, and he censures the wounded silent Iago.

Imagery of sin and devils pervades this play that Bernard Spivak discusses as an “allegory of evil,” and the trouble making Don John becomes That Iago’s first word is “blood” (by His [Christ’s] blood, I.i.4) marks the sacrilegious quality of what is to come, and after an initial success in discrediting Cassio, he swears “By the Mass”. Othello has avowedly eschewed the pagan magic in his Moorish background; his words, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them” (ibid) suggest Christ’s response to arrest at the Garden of Gethsemane. But Othello’s conversion seems only on the surface, as he quickly reverts to savagery. His mother’s handkerchief becomes a supreme token, “To lose’t or give ‘t away were such perdition / As nothing else could match”, and his fall in epileptic seizure represents possession by evil spirits that, as several Gospel stories establish, need exorcism. Othello’s poised apologia before the Venetian senate degenerates into his self-serving defense
of his murder of Desdemona, a failure to admit his fault that persists even to a final self-justification and plea for reputation in the last moments before the ultimate pagan act of suicide.

Humanity is grotesquely lacking, and Othello’s pride is similarly great when he confesses to Desdemona before killing her. He assumes the role of priest, but not the Christ like servant dedicated to truth and forgiveness. The absoluteness of his behavior is especially horrendous when his wife pleads for “But half an hour! But while I say one prayer!” (ibid) only to be smothered. Emilia’s knock comes immediately, a brilliant theatrical showing of irony. Here we see, as Iago warned, “How poor are they that have not patience!” (ibid) Iago is speaking of Roderigo, the rejected suitor who is complicit in his schemes, but he accurately describes the fate of those who lack the Christian virtues exemplified by the accused wives and queens of romance. Early in the play the Duke of Venice urges that “What cannot be preserved when fortune takes, / Patience her injury a mockery makes”, (ibid) but Brabantio, resisting the message of the Crucifixion, rejects the misery that accompanies “poor patience” and insists that such “sentences” (maxims) are “equivocal”. This anticipates Othello’s confidence that he would have had “patience” against many other misfortunes, but that “Patience” will “look grim as hell” when beholding Desdemona’s
assumed betrayal; he denies her vow of chastity, "as I am a Christian". (ibid) Patience requires time, an earthly hint of eternity, and in this play there is very little. There is an intervening sea voyage, with a major storm as in so many romances, but Shakespeare limits to a couple of days and nights the time the characters are together. This means that the action is driven; few plays chronicle so relentless an attempt to force behavior, an insistence upon control, with the corollary lack of self-abnegation. There is a terrifying absolutism, as Othello acknowledges when he agrees to Desdemona's suit for Cassio. "Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again". (ibid)

This is not just extreme rhetoric but an accurate statement about the imbalance that comes in a restricted private world of the moment. By the end of the scene Othello declares, "O now forever / Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!" (ibid) and urges Iago to present "the ocular proof", a sign of his dependence upon appearances in this world that denies substance hidden by accidents.

The play has reminders of the spirit of dedicated Christian community. When Cassio greets Desdemona upon her arrival in Cypress, he echoes the Ave Maria: "Hail to thee, lady! And the grace of heaven / Before, behind thee, and on every hand / Enwheel thee round!" (ibid) But Desdemona practices nothing of the Virgin
Mary’s response in the *Magnificat* when Mary humbly surrenders self to become open to God’s grace. Another Christian virtue, obedience, is a rival theme to jealousy in *Othello*, and Shakespeare explores it in both Desdemona and Emilia. Before the Senate, Brabantio asks his daughter, “Where most you owe obedience?” *(ibid)* Desdemona’s observation of obedience “*divides duty*” - like Cordelia’s response to Lear or Juliet’s conflict of loyalty - fails to acknowledge that her secret marriage has removed the sacrament from the community where it should be celebrated, as she has too strongly chosen to follow her passion for the Moorish general without compromise with her father. Like many women, but not the archetypal accused wife or queen, she loses herself to a man’s worldly values. Desdemona appears the obedient wife, but challenges her husband when she intervenes in military matters - although with the best of intentions. Before Othello’s rage Desdemona cowers into submission to him, but not to the truth which accused wives and queens stick to. Her assertion that Othello is innocent of her murder can be heard as her recognition of her own culpability. But she still lacks understanding when her last words insist, “A guiltless death I die” *(ibid)* - a judgement about nothing except chastity - and that the deed that took her life was done by “Nobody; I myself Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O,
Desdemona thus dies tragically, in an ending that is a far cry from the vindication of accused wives and queens of romance whose false accusers make public confession to lead to a happy ending. Emilia, a defender of her mistress but herself long deluded about her husband Iago, finally perceives and cries out, "The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, Murder!", and she confronts Iago, "You told a lie, an odious, damned lie!" Both women have wavered about where obedience is due, asserting themselves and yet becoming victims of male authority, as is clear in the scene when they discuss behavior in marriage. Although obedience is due to husbands, it must be defined by understanding, which is very difficult between the sexes, as Desdemona admits: "O, these men, these men!" Emilia is a feisty woman when she claims female sexuality and frailty like those of men, but she denies her own responsibility when she concludes, "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so". Desdemona does recognize the superior role, "God me such uses send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!", of the falsely accused wife or queen, who in countless romances does just that when she tolerantly perseveres, accepting the vagaries of destiny, but convinced that compliance to God and faith will lead to a worthy life in this world as well as to a deliverance in the next. Sadly, Desdemona does not act upon her perception, but Emilia
finally makes the dissimilarity between obedience to a husband and to truth: "Tis proper I obey him, but not now". (ibid) And she has a happy death in the theological sense; "So come my soul to bliss as I speak true. / So speaking, as I think, alas, I die". (ibid) Othello is a tragedy, and thus the accused wife and her attendant cannot live happily.

**Ophelia**

Of all the crucial characters in Hamlet, Ophelia is the most stagnant and one-dimensional. She has the potential to become a tragic heroine - to rise above the adversities inflicted upon her- but she instead sinks into madness, becoming simply tragic. This is because Ophelia herself is not as important as her depiction of the dual nature of women in the play. Ophelia’s distinct purpose is to point out at Hamlet’s deformed view of women as unfeeling sexual predators, and the purity and virtue of women.

The extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by Gertrude is far more apparent with the addition of Ophelia to the play. Hamlet’s feelings of fury against his mother can be aimed at Ophelia, who is, in his opinion, hiding her base nature behind an impression of faultlessness.
Through Ophelia we observe Hamlet’s development, or de-evolution into a man convinced that all women are whores; that the women who seem most pure are inside black with dishonesty and sexual desire. And if women are harlots, then they must have their procurers. Gertrude has been made a whore by Claudius, and Ophelia has been made a whore by her father. In Act II, Polonius makes preparations to use the fascinating Ophelia to find out why Hamlet is behaving so peculiarly. Hamlet is not in the room but it seems clear from the subsequent lines that he has overheard Polonius trying to use his daughter’s charms to suit his sneaky purposes. In Hamlet’s distressed mind, there is no gray area: Polonius prostitutes his daughter. And Hamlet tells Polonius so to his face, calling him a “fishmonger” (despite the fact that Polonius cannot decipher the meaning behind Hamlet’s words). As Kay Stanton argues in her essay *Hamlet’s Whores*:

“Perhaps it may be granted… that what makes a woman a whore in Hamlet’s estimation is her sexual use by not one man but by more than one man… what seems to enrage [Hamlet] in the ‘nunnery’ interlude is that Ophelia has put her sense of love and duty for another man above her sense of love and duty for him, just as Gertrude put her sense of love and duty for her new husband above her sense of love and duty for her old. Gertrude chose a brother over a dead Hamlet’,
Ophelia chooses a father over a living Hamlet: both choices can be read as additionally sexually perverse in being, to Hamlet, 'incestuous'. (Stanton, New Essays on Hamlet 168-9)\textsuperscript{xv}

But for others Ophelia symbolises something very different. To those who are not blinded by hurt and rage, Ophelia is the essence of goodness. Very much like Gertrude, young Ophelia is childlike and naïve. Unlike Queen Gertrude, Ophelia has good reason to be unaware of the harsh realities of life. She is very young, and has lost her mother possibly at birth. Her father, Polonius, and brother, Laertes, love Ophelia extremely, and have taken great pains to shelter her. She is not involved with matters of state; she spends her days no doubt engaged in knitting and flower gathering. She returns the love shown to her by Polonius and Laertes tenfold, and couples it with complete and unwavering loyalty. ‘Her whole character is that of simple unselfish affection’ (Bradley 130). Even though her love for Hamlet is strong, she obeys her father when he tells her not to see Hamlet again or accept any letters that Hamlet writes. Her heart is pure, and when she does something dishonest, such as tell Hamlet that her father has gone home when he is really behind the curtain, it is out of valid fear. Ophelia clings to the memory of Hamlet treating her with respect and tenderness, and she defends him and loves him to the very end despite
his rough treatment. She is unable to defend herself, but through her apprehensive responses we see clearly her intense suffering:

Hamlet: I did love you once.

Ophelia: Indeed, my, lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet: You should not have believed me... I loved you not.

Ophelia: I was the more deceived.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Her frailty and innocence work against her as she cannot cope with the unfolding of one distressing event after another. Ophelia’s darling Hamlet causes all her emotional pain throughout the play, and when his hate is responsible for her father’s death, she has endured all that she is capable of enduring and goes insane. But even in her insanity she symbolizes, to everyone but Hamlet, incorruption and virtue. “In her wanderings we hear from time to time an undertone of the deepest sorrow, but never the agonized cry of fear or horror which makes madness dreadful or shocking. And the picture of her death, if our eyes grow dim in watching it, is still purely beautiful.” (Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy 132-3).\textsuperscript{xvii} The coarse songs that she sings in front of Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius are somber reminders that the corrupt world has taken its toll on the pure Ophelia. They show us that only in her insanity does she live up to Hamlet’s false opinion of her as a lascivious woman.
Calphurnia and Portia

The female characters in Shakespeare's plays are a true depiction of the status of women in his days. They were forced to the submission of the demands and requirements of domestic life.

In *Julius Caesar*, the female characters of Calphurnia and Portia are very important to the play for their personal relationships with their husbands, Julius Caesar and Brutus. Despite their concern about their respective husbands' political careers, their opinions are overlooked or rebelled against because they represent feminine values and are grounded in domestic spheres.

Brutus' interaction with Portia, in Act 2, Scene 1, illustrates that women are isolated from politics. Although Portia proves that she is insightful and clever, Brutus is unwilling to speak in confidence to her about his inherent fears. This is based on the widespread belief that women are inexperienced in reason and had no control over their emotions and feelings. Portia is portrayed as the conventional nagging wife who worries about her husband, asking 'Is Brutus sick? Initially Brutus insists that he is not well in health, and that is all. However, Portia uses convincing argument to persuade Brutus that she is reliable and can be trusted. Portia uses emotional blackmail, begging Brutus to unfold to her, his secret because of his vows of love, saying that if he refuses then Portia is
Brutus’ harlot, not his wife. Once Portia begins to sway Brutus, she uses a sensible argument, pointing to her father, Cato, and her husband as proof of her strength and reputation. Portia challenges Brutus, asking him ‘Thank you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered, and so husbanded?’ However, she is merely defined in each instance by her relationship to a man. Finally, Portia provides strong proof of her constancy, a typical masculine trait, in the voluntary wound, in her thigh. The self-inflicted wound destabilizes the gendered concept of virtue – Portia can perform such an act proves that it is an acquired behaviour, not a particular masculine trait. In response, Brutus promises that ‘by and by thy bosom shall partake / The secrets of my heart.’ (ibid)

Portia represents Brutus’ doubts or the feminine ‘Other’ within him. In particular, it is separate scenes; Shakespeare overtly contrasts male and female values. He deems female values as unreliability, associated with weakness, the non-rational and disorder. From this one can infer that male values are reliability, strength of mind and body, rationality and order.

If Act two, Scene one, provides evidence of Portia’s constancy, this is reversed in Act two, Scene four:

'O constancy, be strong upon my side, Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue! I have a man's mind, but a woman's
might. *How hard it is for women to keep counsel!* (Julius Caesar, II, iv, II. 6-9) (ibid)

This scene proves that the women in Rome cannot manage political concerns. Shakespeare portrays Portia as weak and vulnerable, reinstating her ‘into the category of woman.’ (19) Unlike Brutus’ heroic suicide, Shakespeare undermines Portia’s death by attributing it to female lunacy. In Shakespeare’s account, Brutus states that she ‘fell distract / And her attendants absent, swallowed fire’,(20) thus depriving Portia of any dignity. In comparison, Plutarch’s account, in his Life of Marcus Brutus, describes Portia’s death as an honourable act. Although Portia attempts to enter the masculine, public world of Rome, her incapability to cope leaves her firmly grounded within the feminine world.

Julius Caesar’s interaction with Calphurnia follows Brutus’ scene of interaction with Portia. Again, a wife’s role is as worrier about the safety of her husband, as Calphurnia exclaims, ‘You shall not stir out of your house today.’ (23) (ibid) Calphurnia’s belief in her dreams about Caesar’s death portrays women as being superstitious, despite her claim that she ‘never stood on ceremonies / Yet now they fright [her].’ (ibid) Her dream images recall the theme of wife as worrier or mourner, as she imagines herself to be ‘A lioness [that] hath whelped in the streets’. (25) In contrast, Caesar
has boldly asserted that he does not fear ‘death, a necessary end.’ (ibid) (26) However, Calphurnia’s fears about ‘blood upon the Capitol’ (ibid) (27) exist to highlight the doubts that men hide under their assertions about constancy. Although Caesar agrees to remain at home to please Calphurnia, as he states ‘for thy humour I will stay at home’, (ibid) (28) he would not have agreed unless he shared Calphurnia’s fears. Caesar uses his wife as a convenient excuse when he tells Decius:

Calphurnia here, my wife, stays me at home. She dreamt tonight she saw my statue, Which, like a fountain with a hundred spouts, Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans Came smiling, and did bathe their hands in it. (ibid II, ii, ll.75-79)

When Decius mocks Caesar’s submission to his wife’s whims, saying ‘Break up the Senate till another time, / When Caesar’s wife shall meet with better dreams’, (ibid) (29) Caesar changes his mind. When his reputation is at stake Caesar exclaims ‘How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia!’ (ibid) (30) However, the fulfilment of Calphurnia’s prediction suggests that men should put more faith in the intuitive powers of women.

Throughout the play, Caesar’s power has been ambiguous. Cassius feminises Caesar in his description about the swimming contest, telling Brutus that Caesar cried “‘Help me, Cassius, or I
sink!” (ibid)’ (31) Cassius also describes Caesar’s fever in Spain, calling him ‘a sick girl.’ (ibid) (32) However, Cassius demonstrates that he fears the power Caesar would claim if crowned, comparing Caesar, a ‘Colossus’ with everyone else, ‘petty men’. (33) Likewise, Calphurnia’s dream of Caesar’s wounded statue emphasises the ‘contradictory images of Caesar as both Colossus and sick girl, mighty in his triumph over Pompey, yet childless and deaf.’ (ibid) (34) Caesar is ultimately feminised in his assassination – he is rendered powerless and silent, just like the women in Roman society.

Portia and Calphurnia in the play *Julius Caesar* are lightly drawn. The two characters shall be compared to consider what they have in common. They are obviously fond of their husbands. Calphurnia is afraid for her husband to go to the Capitol.

_Do not go forth today: call it my fear_

_That keeps you in the house, and not your own._

(Act II, Scene II)

Portia shows the same affection and concern for her husband. She is anxious about Brutus’s health and for the success of the conspiracy. She cannot bear to think that he is troubled,

_Dear my lord,

Make me acquainted with your cause of grief._
(Act II, Scene I)

Portia and Calphurnia are frail physically. When the former comes out in the morning air Brutus tells her,

*Portia what mean you? Wherefore rise you now?*

*It is not for your health thus to commit*

*Your weak condition to the raw cold morning.*

(Act II, Scene I)

When Portia realizes that Brutus is likely to fail in the battle she loses her faculties. Calphurnia is, according to Caesar, unable to have children and is often pale. She sleeps fitfully and is prone to nightmare. She is unbalanced and emotional.

Both women have nervous dispositions. Portia is disturbed when Brutus has gone with the conspirators. She tries to send Lucius on an errand but does not tell what she wants:

*Lucius:*

*Madam, what shall I do?*

*Run to the Capital, and nothing else?*

*And so return to you, and nothing else?*

(Act II, Scene IV)

Calphurnia is inferior to Portia from this point of view. She is frenzied and is treated almost like a spoilt child:
Calphurnia:

_O Caesar! These things are beyond all use,_

_And I do fear them._

Caesar:

_What can be avoided_

_Whose end is purpos’d by the mighty gods?_

(Act II, Scene II)

Portia is however, much more sensitive than Calphurnia. Before her husband she shows femaleness and humility. She kneels before him and has even wounded herself for his sake:

_I have made strong proof of my constancy,_

_Giving myself a voluntary wound_

_Here, in the thigh..._

(Act II, Scene I)

Calphurnia is governed by her emotions rather than her reason. Portia, although emotional, is more logical. She has a woman’s insight for seeing into the mind of Brutus:

_No, my Brutus,_

_You have some sick offence within your mind._

(Act II, Scene I)

Portia believes that she is an exceptional woman,
I grant I am a woman, but, withal,

A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife

(Act II, Scene I)

But she is aware of her womanly frailties,

Ay me! how weak a thing

The heart of woman is.

(Act II, Scene IV)

Dramatically, the women have been included to exhibit the private lives of the two main characters, Brutus and Caesar. The private emotions of these two men can be compared with their attitudes in public. Portia and Brutus have real affection for each other. The latter cannot bear anything to harm Portia even by implication:

You are my true and honourable wife,

(Act II, Scene I)

and he shows his earnestness in the next lines,

As dear to me as are the ruddy drops

That visit my sad heart.

(Act II, Scene I)

Caesar’s treatment of the irritable Calphurnia is a sharp contrast. He blames her for being barren not thinking that is might be himself
who is unable to have children. He does not spare her feelings when he says,

_To touch Calphurnia; for our elders say,
the barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse..._

_(Act I, Scene II)_

Later, when Calphurnia tells him about her dream he decides to stay away from the Capitol. He forgets the promise to his wife quickly when Decius suggests another interpretation. As if this is not enough he adds insult to injury by rebuking his wife in front of Decius:

_How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia!_
_I am ashamed I did yield to them._

 _(Act II, Scene II)_

Thus their attitudes to the wives have a bearing on the characters of the two principles. The death of Portia serves to show the extent of Brutus’s failure and emphasises the influence of Caesar after his death. Perhaps a technical reason for having the two women in the play at all was to provide parts for the two young boys who did so well in similar parts in the comedies. Finally, it is often hard for the audience to imagine themselves in the same situation as any of the characters in
the play. The fact that the main characters have ordinary homes, hopes, failings and wives makes it easier for them to do so.

Portia and Calphurnia are- fond of their husbands, physically weak, nervous, Portia more sensitive; Calphurnia petulant, Portia shows womanliness and humility; Calphurnia more emotional, Portia can reason but is aware that she has certain failings.

“Religions of Europe, primarily the Christian religion, then began defining 'values' that denigrated not only women but whole nationalities and races who did not fall into this prescription of proper. Because the Renaissance re-lit the candle of the classic Greek era, masculine virtues were again given top priority, and the rise of Christianity was through the political systems of Roman hierarchy; hence, values of domination and control joined religion, and an order was installed that then denied both certain races and women a powerful place within that dogmatic structure... masculine virtues were again given top priority, and the rise of Christianity was through the political systems of Roman hierarchy, hence, values of domination and control held hands with religion, and an order was installed that then denied both certain races and women a powerful place within that dogmatic structure.”

In Antony and Cleopatra, Octavius Caesar wants to promote male-dominated Rome as the centre of civilisation. In particular,
Shakespeare illustrates male values in the play by comparing Antony’s heroic past with his present shame. Caesar previously admired Antony for his ability to survive in a hostile environment, enforcing the Roman practice of self-deprivation:

...at thy heel Did famine follow, whom thou fought’st against, Thou daintily brought up, with patience more Than savages could suffer. Thou didst drink The stale of horses and the gilded puddle Which beasts would cough at... (Antony and Cleopatra, I, iv, ll.58-63) (35)

Caesar praises Antony’s ‘heroic masculinity... his capacity to survive in this wintry landscape’. (ibid) (36) Scarcity and hunger define masculinity, because ‘not-eating permits the fantasy of entire self-sufficiency, the escape from the body and its effeminizing need.’ (ibid) (37) Caesar also praises self-deprivation because of his love of fasting, that is he would rather ‘fast from all, four days, / Than drink so much in one.’ (ibid) (38) While Caesar thinks that this proves his masculinity, the others prefer to drink to enjoy themselves. In direct comparison with this is Antony’s lazy self-indulgence in Egypt, where ‘he fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel.’ (ibid) (39) Caesar regards this self-indulgence as feminine behaviour. If Rome represents the male value of stringency, Egypt represents the female value of indulgence.
In *Antony and Cleopatra*, ‘there are virtually no women in Rome, there is no natural abundance.’ (40) The main female character in Rome is Octavia, sister of Octavius Caesar. Like the majority of Roman women, she represents chastity and purity, as Enobarbus states ‘Octavia is of a holy, cold, and still conversation.’ (41) These qualities are compared with Cleopatra’s sensuality, which is a complete opposite to Octavia’s nature. Although Octavia is the sister of Caesar, and highly ranked among Roman women, her attempts to intervene in the political sphere, ‘striving against the dominant institution of politics in Shakespeare’s Rome, she is bound to fail.’ (42) In Rome, women are primarily portrayed in terms of their personal relationships with the central male characters. Octavia is only important to the political sphere when she temporarily unites Caesar and Antony through her marriage to Antony.

Antony’s wife, Fulvia, also attempts to gain access to the public and political sphere. In revenge for Antony’s desertion of Fulvia for Cleopatra, Fulvia attempts to create a rift between Antony and Caesar. At the beginning of the play, Cleopatra’s mocking of Antony shows that Fulvia’s plans were successful. Cleopatra presents an image of Antony being ‘pulled back and forth’ between Fulvia, a woman, and Caesar, who is younger than Antony:
Fulvia perchance is angry; or who knows If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent His powerful mandate to you: ‘Do this, or this; Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that. Perform’t, or else we damn thee.’

(Antony and Cleopatra, I, i, l.20-24)

However, the threat of Fulvia is cancelled with the news of her death.

In comparison with Roman women, Cleopatra has full access to public and private spheres as the ruler of Egypt. Egypt opposes Rome in every way – it is a female-dominated society which promotes freedom, indulgence and hedonism, whilst Rome forbids pleasure and promotes self-deprivation. Cleopatra’s court, which consists of women and a eunuch, is a symbol of female power in Egypt. However, unlike the uneven distribution of power in Rome, Cleopatra has a casual relationship with her servants, treating them more like companions than staff.

However, the main focus upon Cleopatra is for her relationship with Antony. Caesar and the Romans perceive Cleopatra to be a negative influence upon Antony, so they demonise Cleopatra ‘as Rome’s most dangerous enemy, a foreigner and woman ruler whose power was fatally inflected by her sexuality.’ (43) Although power in Rome is associated with men, Cleopatra uses her feminine
power over men. In Act 2, Scene 2, Enobarbus gives a sensual description of how Cleopatra uses her sexuality and beauty to seduce Antony. He described Cleopatra as ‘O’erpicturing that Venus’ (44) in a barge that was ornately decorated and perfumed. When Antony invited her to supper, Cleopatra gains control of the situation by inviting Antony to be her guest instead.

Although the Romans perceive Cleopatra as dangerously powerful, she shows signs of weakness and natural benevolence. Cleopatra’s main redeeming factor is her fertility and role as mother. Whereas there are few Roman women and little fertility, Cleopatra is as fertile as the banks of the Nile. Her ability to bear children is symbolic of her regenerative powers. Cleopatra exposes her weakness when she flees the scene of battle without realising the consequences of her actions. Cleopatra apologises to Antony, saying ‘Forgive my fearful sails! I little thought / You would have followed.’ (45) Kahn argues that Cleopatra has ‘involuntarily testified to her essential femininity, demonstrating her unfitness for battle, rather than ‘the insidious intention to lead men into it’. (46) Enobarbus supports Cleopatra’s argument that she was unaware Antony would follow, declaring that ‘Antony only’ (47) is to blame for following her. When Antony tortures Thidias for kissing Cleopatra’s hand, Cleopatra
realises that she is subordinated ‘queen though she may be, in this Roman world of ruthless domination.’ (48)

The relationship between Antony and Cleopatra is extremely complex. Although the Romans criticise Antony for allowing Cleopatra to dominate him, the balance of power within their relationship is subject to change. It can be argued that Cleopatra manipulates Antony when she repeatedly ‘draws Antony to her and divides him from Caesar and all that is Roman’, but Antony is a grown man and returns to Rome whenever he wants to. (49) The most arguable case of Cleopatra’s emasculation of Antony can be found in Act 2, Scene 5, when Cleopatra recalls the ‘night of revelry when she subjugated Antony and then engaged in cross-dressing with him’. (50) Cleopatra transforms Antony into the woman’s role by putting her ‘tires and mantles on him’, (51) and assumes the male role herself by wearing ‘his sword Philippa.’ (52)

Cleopatra’s role as a creative, regenerative woman is also demonstrated by her positive effect on Antony. Although Cleopatra manipulates him, she also encourages his masculinity, which is rejuvenated through his sexual relationship with Cleopatra. In Cleopatra’s vision of Antony’s ‘heroic manhood’, Shakespeare associates masculinity with ‘the maternal body’ as the source of ‘male bounty’. (53) Whereas Caesar seeks to destroy and belittle
Antony, Cleopatra creates a vision of him connected to his sexual power.

The true measure of Cleopatra’s power is in her ability to look beautiful even in death. When Caesar sees her body, he comments that even in death ‘she would catch another Antony’. (54) Cleopatra’s willingness to die for Antony takes his masculinity further. Although Cleopatra’s suicide is an attempt to ‘defeat Caesar of the additional victory he yearns for’, her death also serves to unite her with Antony through an act of ‘marital consummation.’ (55) Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra like a Roman wife who commits suicide as a ‘testament of her love for her husband.’ (56) Although Cleopatra is allowed more dramatic force than other women are in Shakespeare’s Roman plays, she is still ‘presented almost entirely in relation to Antony.’ (57)

Antony is a complex character due to the two opposing worlds that he is drawn to. He is pulled to Rome ‘by his investment in the race for power’, just as he is drawn to Egypt in his lust for sexual power. If Rome represents politics and power for Antony, Egypt must represent pleasure and sexuality. When Antony crosses the boundary between Rome and Egypt, he risks losing a part of his heroic identity as well as gaining a more sensual and fun side to his personality. In his tug of love and war between Egypt and Rome,
Antony loses his virtues, but he develops a new sense of masculinity ‘founded on incorporation of the female.’ (58) In an attempt to restore his masculinity, Antony performs the only honourable act left to him – suicide. Through an honourable death, Antony can not only defeat Caesar of the opportunity to murder him, but also gain Caesar’s admiration. After Antony’s death, Caesar recognises him as a hero, and ‘the person above all others to whom Caesar considers himself bound by intimate, affectionate ties.’ (59) Love is not presented as an ennobling relationship in *Antony and Cleopatra* but rather as a potential threat to one’s own personality, as a tormenting succession of affection and disappointment, disillusion and dream. Cleopatra seems to be more noble and determined than Antony.

In Julius Caesar, the female characters exist to oppose the values of a male-dominated Rome. Although the women would like to gain access to this public sphere, it is denied to them on the grounds of the values they represent. However, the masculinity of Rome is more starkly contrasted with the femininity of Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra. While the women in Rome remain rooted in the domestic sphere, Cleopatra is associated with masculine power. The men in Rome fear Cleopatra because her power is doubly ‘Other’ – foreign and feminine. Although Cleopatra is ultimately rendered powerless through her suicide, which is a traditionally male
form of death, she remains beautiful - this emphasizes her femininity. Cleopatra exists not only to oppose the masculine values, but also to challenge the Roman ideals. In her refusal to be defeated, Cleopatra underlines both the weaknesses of men and Rome.

Not long after his death in 1616, Shakespeare was accredited - by the Duchess of Newcastle\textsuperscript{xx}, nonetheless - as a keen observer of femininity: "One would think [Shakespeare] had been metamorphosed from a man to a woman, for who could describe Cleopatra Better than he hath done?" (Cavendish). The plays covered herein provide examples to validate this claim. As well, Shakespeare's feminine depth will be discovered in a particular male character as well. After all, his male characters, which purely work to complement many female qualities, must be followed as well, to include a broader range of perceptions.

The totality of William Shakespeare's works, in unison with the time period in which they were written-the Renaissance period for Britain-might cause a reader to question his feminist stance. Regardless that the concept of feminism was neither recognized nor debated at the time Shakespeare's plays were written, Edmond H. Wollmann\textsuperscript{xxi} displays resemblances of today's concept of feminism to be found. This shines a light on feminine oppression through the authoritative name of religion:
Religions of Europe, primarily the Christian religion, then began defining 'values' that denigrated not only women but whole nationalities and races who did not fall into this prescription of proper. Because the Renaissance re-lit the candle of the classic Greek era, masculine virtues were again given top priority, and the rise of Christianity was through the political systems of Roman hierarchy; hence, values of domination and control joined religion, and an order was installed that then denied both certain races and women a powerful place within that dogmatic structure... masculine virtues were again given top priority, and the rise of Christianity was through the political systems of Roman hierarchy, hence, values of domination and control held hands with religion, and an order was installed that then denied both certain races and women a powerful place within that dogmatic structure.

During this time when females were kept under a strict, proverbial leash, Shakespeare exposed female characters and their biological reasoning. Another article appropriately titled *Shakespeare's Women* surely stands out. Lewis claims, "I believe that Shakespeare, because of his extraordinary genius for portraying human behavior, necessarily depicted the condition of women within a patriarchal system and created women characters which in their richness, transcend the limitations of his time" (Lewis).xxii Surely to typify
Shakespeare as a feminist seems extremely general and simple. After all, once legitimately looked upon, the heroines of his plays all have a deep trace of rebellion and in this age where a disobedient woman simply was not tolerated. But, as with any other pigeonhole, the depth of Shakespeare's plays transcends labeling. Moreover, the themes of these plays are rich and many layers create a new dimension to each new reading, in both the social hierarchy as well as the individual characters.

Goneril and Regan are twin incarnations of concentrated evil, and it is doubtful whether any creatures so foul and wicked have ever existed outside the world of Shakespeare’s imagination. It is in the fitness of things that they should be sisters but not that they should be sisters of Cordelia nor daughters of Lear. Kent has to invoke the stars to explain this untoward riddle.

While Shakespeare has not cared, in portraying the two sisters, to expend much time in making them plausible, it is interesting to observe that he has differentiated them from each other. Goneril, the elder, is much the more formidable of the two. In the very first scene, when she flatters Lear, she indulges in less rhetoric than Regan, and seems surer of her ground. And immediately Lear commits the fatal mistake of abdication. Goneril begins to scheme for humiliating him
and divesting him of even such small authority as he still cares to possess.

Regan is apparently not yet ready for this unfilial conspiracy: she suggests,

"We shall further think of it." But Goneril is nothing if not thorough. "We must do something", she answers, "and in the heat". xxiii

It is in her house that Lear gets his first shock. Deliberately and of malice afore-thought, she plans the insult, and sends her sister written instructions to repeat it. In all this, she acts on her own initiative without the approval of her husband, Albany, whom she holds to be milk-livered. Lest her plans should miscarry, she visits her sister in person to see that the King does not fare better at her hands.

Regan indeed appears to be somewhat afraid of her sister. When Kent and Oswald prefer complaints against each other, she is more concerned with what her sister may feel at the treatment received by her messenger than by how her father may react to the sentence on Kent. And when Lear in person complains against Goneril, Regan defends her like one standing in some awe of her.
Under Goneril’s purposeful guidance, Lear’s fate is sealed. Regan, at whose feed he seeks asylum from the unfilial ingratitude of Goneril, proves the apt pupil of her sister. And between them the wicked sisters drive the old King to the verge of madness. Writhing with impotent rage, Lear rushes out into the darkness to face a storm of the elements. Goneril, her purpose achieved, is callous and pitiless. But Regan, no less anxious to drive to her father crazy, appears nevertheless to be somewhat startled by the quick succession of events. She tries to justify herself, and gives expression to uneasy reflection.

Even before Nemesis overtakes them for their unconscionable crime against their father, their ranks are split by Edmund. Both the sisters fall in love with this bastard. And here, as elsewhere, Goneril plans with ruthless efficiency. The war with Cordelia gives her an opportunity to scheme the death of her husband, who stands in the way of her love and she does not hesitate to take it. And when through sheer accident Regan becomes a widow and gains advantage in being able to press her suit openly and legally, Goneril swiftly poisons her. In the end when all her plans go awry and everything seems lost, Goneril has the courage to stab herself.
What differentiates Regan from her more formidable sister is a certain inferiority in intelligence and weakness of will. And like all people who are weak and vicious, she is malicious and cruel. In the words of Coleridge, she has the power of casting more venom. She seems to take a sadistic pleasure in the purposeless infliction of cruelty (as witness her egging on Cornwall to punish Kent and torture Gloucester) and her tongue is even more venomous and bitter than that of Goneril. To take but one example, when Lear says, “I gave you all”, she sharply retorts, “And in good time you gave it”. (ibid)

Regan, though she manages to quit this life without committing adultery, or murder or suicide, is certainly not the more attractive therefore. There is indeed little to choose between the sisters, but as Mr. Verity observes, “though the elder is by far the more dangerous and guiltier, yet the younger seems somehow the more odious because weaker”. xxiv

**Cordelia**

Cordelia is among the most beloved of Shakespeare’s heroines; yet it is amazing to realise with what economy of means the dramatist has succeeded in impressing her portrait on us. For the greater part of the play, she is off the stage; she hardly speaks a
hundred lines throughout. Yet she is for us vivid, lifelike, and unforgettable.

Cordelia is the youngest daughter of Lear. It is a strange trick of fate that made her the sister of two such monsters of evil like Goneril and Regan. Never was much love lost between her and her elder sisters and her quiet but outspoken scepticism about their professions of filial affection shows clearly that she had penetrated into the secret of their hearts. Honest, clear-sighted, loving as Cordelia is, she lacks the art to make her love demonstrative. There is in her –

“...a tardiness in nature

Which often leaves the history unspoken

That it intends to do.” (ibid)

Not that she is always tongue-tied or chary of speech. Her farewell to her sisters, restrained and dignified as it is, nevertheless says too much, judged from the point of view of tact. What she cannot do is ‘to heave her heart into her mouth’, openly to give expression ‘to deeply-fit sentiments’. She is psychologically an introvert. Endowed with self-control, restraint and dignity, she feels it a sacrilege and a desecration to make a public exhibition of so intimate a feeling as her love for her father. Her sisters’ fulsome
flattery disgusts her and almost puts her in a cold rage. And when Lear, completely alien to the souls of his daughters, bids Cordelia compete in a game of flattery, she cannot humour him. Much, certainly, was not required of her. Without being insincere, extravagant or hyperbolic, she could have made the capricious old man feel the strength of her love. But she was unable to meet just the one demand made of her that could have averted the tragedy. What she tells her father is not even strictly true. Her attachment for her father is deeper than her words suggest, indeed too deep for words. And to say that she can love her husband only by reducing her affection for her father is to something less than truth. The patent fact is that Cordelia is so made up that she is constrained by a compelling force to retire into her shell, whenever she feels deep emotion. And so the inevitable crisis occurs and Cordelia departs from her father’s court in disgrace.

When we hear of her again, her reaction to the news of her father’s suffering is described to us by a gentleman to Kent. Even in that moment of shock, she is queen over herself and as it all emotional crises, tongue-tied:
"Faith, once or twice she heaved the name of

‘father’ Pantingly forth, as if it press’d her heart."

( ibid )

With calm efficiency, she sets about taking measures to aid her
father. Britain is invaded, and at long last, she finds herself reunited
with a mad and enfeebled Lear. In that marvelous scene where Lear
recognises her, we see the loveliness of her tender affection.

But the gallant adventure fails. She and Lear are taken
prisoners. Realising fully what is in store for her at the hands of these
sisters and daughters, she is concerned for the sake of the old man,
whose last chances of a peaceful end are dashed to pieces by her
military defeat. And so we take leave of her, and in the end we are
allowed to see only her dead body in her father’s arms.

There is, on the whole, an ethereal quality about her, a divine
combination of tenderness and strength which makes her remain in
this world and yet keep somewhat aloof and detached. Lear spoke the
truth when he told her: “Thou art a soul in bliss.” ( ibid )

There is a whole range of emotions and passions expressed
through the women characters in Shakespeare’s plays. From the
strong, firm, innocent Cordelia to the wicked, treacherous, unkind
Goneril to a strange and weird combination of good and bad in Lady
Macbeth one can see a complete range of women in his plays. Shakespeare does not in any way try to manipulate while portraying his women characters. He simply projects them as they are found in real life. His intentions are not to tarnish and demean women nor to praise and eulogise them. His women in his plays are just women, complete with all their incompletenesses. In the true sense it can be said that Shakespeare mirrors life and reality.

Thus we find the women characters in Shakespeare’s tragedies to be a sort of mix that is both human and inhuman. The milk of human kindness can be found in them and at the same time their witchy character also getting fully displayed. They seem to be an embodiment of both spiritual and naturalistic values within the limits of environment and tradition.
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