

The representation of women in Shakespeare's plays is circumscribed within the patriarchal ideology of early modern Europe. While critical opinion remains sharply divided on the nature and function of such representations, it is possible to see women as cultural productions. Rather than seeing them as the inspirational creations of a great mind, or biased representations of a male writer, this dissertation examines these women produced dialogically on the stage or in the text. As much as they are inscribed in the text or the theatre, they are produced by ideologies that would not have wanted them in the larger theatre of the world. To this extent, the women in Shakespeare's plays are "contemporary" productions in diverse historical settings, whether in Cleopatra's Egypt, Antony's Rome, Shylock's Venice, Lear's England, Hamlet's Denmark, Richard's London or indeed Dauphin's France.

Women are used as tools defined by institutional as well as individual arrangements. They are used against their wishes, and often despite their wishes. It is remarkable that the plays of Shakespeare dramatize the mutation of women into tools, either as passive objects that do as told or as collaborators or assistants to men, even as the dramatization of such mutation runs counter to societal sanctions or state ideologies. Central to these ideological or dialogical productions of women in the texts are issues of freedom and rights. These issues, in turn, are inscribed in questions of property, sexuality, and forms of power in which a woman may want to invest. As early modern Europe debates issues relating to the rights of the human subject to interrogate different forms of

authority, denying women the right to choose for themselves—or to claim for themselves what is their due because of their socially configured gendered roles—appears increasingly difficult. This is when hegemonic power structures, which may be otherwise divided against themselves, combine and collaborate to ensure that women in search of visibility and freedom must be controlled. The degrees of such control will depend on the nature of what is sought. However, rather than always going for direct confrontation, women may be subject to ideological state apparatus, disguised in universals such as God, religion, morality, order, propriety, etc. When a woman cannot be contained through the seemingly benign wings of the power grid—marriage is one of the most convenient devices here—she may be alienated and demonized before her extermination. The requirements are simple: women must not only give in, they must be seen giving in.

Insofar as women are concerned, institutions identified as protective or beneficial are shown to be too coercive or ideologically motivated terms **even** to recognize the need for change in the status of women. The family begins as the primary unit that provides education and security to the girl child but ensures that the training is such that all basic rights stay with men. In that sense the family is the primary unit of exploitation of the girl child. In *Measure for Measure*, a play that seems to critique the sexualization of women, Isabella and Mariana resist being used. While none of them meets the fate of women who expressly defy society elsewhere they are contained. Though indirectly, they submit to the larger

coercive mechanism of the “welfare ideology” of the Duke, which, while seemingly upholding justice with temperance, still endorses the institutional walling-in of women. Marriage is used as the universally useful tool to accommodate or control women who are too strong-willed. The key here is dutiful subjection. Similarly, Miranda is nurtured and tutored by Prospero in *The Tempest* for his own personal ends. While his love for Miranda may not be ideologically motivated, his designs for his daughter are. For men like Prospero a daughter is an investment. In the absence of a son, the daughter can be used to acquire a son-in-law, a proxy-son, who may help him in carrying out his designs. Prospero’s plans for his daughter are political calculations to get back at his enemies. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is used to get to Hamlet. She falls in love with Hamlet who uses her to get back at his enemies, first by giving them confusing signals regarding his situation, and by repeatedly hurting her for no fault of hers. By repeatedly mocking at her chastity, Hamlet drives her to madness. In a way, he extracts revenge for his father’s death and mother’s infidelity from Ophelia’s death.

The issue of daughters claiming inheritance, rather than accepting whatever has been decided by her male relatives, is a critical issue that is dramatized in Shakespeare. Any woman claiming wealth or land must be portrayed as evil or designing. Here again the institution of marriage is put to good use. Daughters are disposed off to avoid turf wars with male heirs. In the clash of wills between Lear and Cordelia it is the former’s vanity and the latter’s

passivity which takes centre stage rather than any other issue at hand. In the case of Egeus and Hermia too, the undesirable marriage proposal merely brings out the highhandedness of patriarchal will. In Jessica's case, issues of race and religion are central, although after her elopement, Shylock's cry for his ducats lends a comic edge to the whole affairs. It is remarkable that the free space allowed to Jessica is solely in order to tame and neutralize the Jew. Desdemona's death highlights the risks of getting married to an outsider. Marriage has to be socially sanctioned to be valid. Thus Shakespeare dramatizes various challenges to social utopias through the frame of women wronging and wronged against.

The emergence of women—who, in their capacity as wives, widows, and mothers, influence matters of State—makes patriarchy uncomfortable and insecure. So even as they play the role of manipulators, they end up at times as tools in someone else's design. Strong women like Margaret and Eleanor, themselves schemers and plotters, find themselves outmaneuvered and pushed around as pawns of patriarchy. All these women are made to realize that they are not important in themselves. They are seen as sexualized figures regardless of nationality or social hierarchy. They are rather, signifiers of patriarchal power and possession. While some of these women enjoy power as wives they end up as bitter widows.

Interestingly, traditional gender relations and roles are called into question each time stereotypes are challenged through these women. Given that they are related to men who either govern, or are close to the throne, they get marginalized

as witches or mad women. John's mother Elinor dies when her son is still the king. Margaret, Eleanor, and Elizabeth are left to live out their loss with bitterness. Interestingly, these women while in power, display sufficient intelligence to the detriment of their weak or passive husbands and sons. That they are vilified as shrews and witches or silly interfering schemers can be attributed to the fact that women were not expected to take part in power politics, let alone warfare.

In the case of Lady Macbeth, however, we have a woman encouraging bloodshed to secure her husband's latent ambition. Although she takes the initiative, it is always her husband's cause that she promotes. However, her reception, like the rest of the ambitious wives, is in terms of her excesses.

Women are required by their circumstances to take part in the politics of power, leading to their alienation from State, family and themselves, and are humbled by the power of politics. Whether they succeed or fail, which they invariably do, their role as mothers or as consorts is prejudged because of their gender. Interestingly, their ability to remain in or out of power play gets sexualized. They seem to be in excess of normal, an attribute dramatized with greater clarity in some other plays.

In the world of men women like Mistress Overdone and Mistress Quickly play a necessary role to contain men's excesses but are themselves seen as excess. Similarly, Margaret, Eleanor, and Joan compete for political space in a

men's world, and as they deal with the situation with greater efficiency than their male counterparts, their competence is explained in terms of dark and dangerous ambitions, which, in turn, can be attributed to excessive sexuality. Helen and Cressida are pushed to the centre of a world crowded by aggressive men and cling to whoever is available at a given point of time, primarily to save themselves from greater abuse. This is a destiny thrust on women by men who, characteristically, will not take the responsibility. Whether driven by economic compulsions, political insecurity or simply the compulsion to save themselves among hostile crowds, women appear as threats to a male world otherwise considered safe.

Repeatedly, Shakespeare's plays foreground the rise and fall of beautiful, intelligent, and powerful women. These women use beauty, intelligence, and power as personal capitals that operate independently of male wish or help. These personal assets, which offer women ways out of patriarchal structures, however liminal or illusory, are considered dangerous because they help women in a kind of self-fashioning not acceptable to their society. In such circumstances, talents or attributes that appear self-sufficient are represented as diabolic and anarchic. While it is difficult to explain the degree of erasure of female wish or freedom in early modern Europe, the plays of Shakespeare offer counter-narratives to social practices or political choices. While it is true that women mostly fail in their open wars against patriarchy, their subversive potential, their role in appropriating male authority while seemingly working under it, and their public articulations

help their society prepare for a long haul. The plays highlight an irreversible search for free spaces for and by women, however unsuccessfully fashioned, or unjustly presented. What is presented on stage as a spectacular act or as an exceptional effort on a woman's part can be said to lead early modern Europe to different social formations that revise the woman's part, or at least prepare to do so. While it is not possible to say what Shakespeare wanted to say, it is possible to see his female characters perform important roles in the circulation of ideology and resistance at the same time.