



## Women As a Thing in Shakespearean Drama

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**Abstract.** According to Shakespearean drama, women have been treated as things or belongings due to the patriarchal values of the Elizabethan era. Female characters tend to stay in the confines of male desire and societal expectations, and this makes them objectified and marginalized. For example, Female characters in his plays exhibit distinct forms of self-assertion., Through their exceptional talent for depicting human behaviour, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, Gertrude, Desdemona and Emilia illustrate women's status in a male-dominated society. These female characters, with their depth and complexity, surpass the constraints of their era, making their stories timeless. The objectification of this raises tragic results, ranging from betrayal to loss of identity. Shakespeare's works invite audiences to critically examine the implications of gender roles and the enduring impact of societal constructs on women's lives. Shakespeare's works consider the social values that create women in the male view, and he invites the audience to think about the question of gender and power. In portraying women in such a manner, Shakespeare shows how the social structure constrains women and how they maintain their dignity in the same system.

**Keywords:** Objectification, Patriarchy, Identity, Shakespeare, Gender Roles.





## 1. Introduction

In the Elizabethan period, women were constantly oppressed and endured unjust treatment. They were not given chances like males. They were also prejudiced and could not select their destiny (Karisma, 2022, p.1). Women's societal positions were severely restricted despite a single female monarch in Elizabethan England. The Elizabethan society had distinct gender roles, whereby males were primarily expected to fulfil the role of providers while women were supposed to assume the responsibilities of homemakers and mothers. Typically, women would give birth to a child around every two years. However, because of high mortality rates among infants and children, families did not always have many offspring. Women regarded having children as a tremendous honour since they saw children as God's gifts and took great satisfaction in becoming mothers (Bell, 1998, p.105).

It is widely debated that humanistic ideals characterized the Renaissance era. The subjects of science, freedom, and human dignity were discussed extensively. However, these humanist principles only pertained to the masculine constituents of society. The concept of a woman's right to express herself was completely disregarded. However, even though most authors were males, they still participated in debates over the role of women (Showalter, 1981). Several treatises and guidebooks were written on women's appropriate conduct and look, such as the renowned *Homilie on the State of Matrimony*, which had significant importance within the *Book of Common Prayer*, a widely used text in the Anglican Church. Women's conventional and inherent role was essential for the nation's economic and political advancement and expansion (Gubergritz, 2018).

Elizabethan culture conformed to a patriarchal structure, whereby males held positions of authority and women were seen as subordinate. Women were seen as "the more vulnerable gender," not just in terms of physical prowess but emotional resilience. There was a prevailing belief that women were always in need of someone to care for them. If the individuals were married, their spouse would be expected to provide for their well-being. If unmarried, their father, brother, or another male relative was required to care for them (Lucas, 2023, p.8).

Men dominated all aspects of society; "... all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, preachers, magistrates, [and] lords" (Montrose, 1983, p.68). Women had minimal influence over their social roles. The most honourable existence combined scholarly pursuits with political engagement and public service. Such an existence was unthinkable for women because a public reputation was a sign of immorality and scandal. Women were not permitted to hold positions of authority in any aspect of society. Men were valued for their capacity to classify objects and for their beauty. During this period of great creative achievements, men "may have taken to commerce or to drink, but as a matter of fact, they took to





visible beauty" (Putnam, 1970, p.164). They established attractiveness as a vital aspect of existence, and only males could distinguish between beautiful and unattractive things.

Overall, women relied solely on the males who supported them for their means of livelihood. During her childhood and teenage years, a lady relied on her father for support, both in terms of protection and financial assistance. Once she matured, the obligation would be transferred to a spouse, who assumed a comparable economic role. Spinsterhood was an unfamiliar concept; women who remained unmarried faced extreme poverty and were stigmatized as witches. The one feasible option for a woman who desired to avoid marriage was to join the convent of the nuns. The preservation of a woman's virginity on her wedding night was seen as of utmost significance. Irrespective of the religious connotations of premarital sex, the act of a woman being "dishonoured" before her marriage to a man brings disgrace upon her and her father. As previously mentioned, a father's responsibility toward his daughter includes the management of her income and safeguarding her honour. Her father was held accountable if her reputation was tarnished before her wedding, and the offence was linked to incest.

## 2. Women In the Elizabethan Age

### 2.1. Marriage

Elizabeth I (1533-1603) rejected several marriage proposals and opted to stay single throughout her lifetime. Such occurrences were quite unusual throughout that era. In the sixteenth century, it was customary for individuals of all socioeconomic strata, regardless of gender, to enter into marriage. Marriage provided them with both social standing and the opportunity to have offspring. The study of Renaissance ideas about women's and men's societal roles should also focus on the institution of marriage. The responsibilities shared between a husband and wife were detailed, and both partners—the man and the woman—were required to uphold these obligations. Husbands are expected to take on leadership roles and domination in the home. Although "the first duty which the husband has toward the wife is to love her,... the next duty is to rule or govern his wife in all duties that properly belong to marriage, using his knowledge, wisdom, and judgment to maintain himself in the place that God intended him to have" (Camden, 1975, p.112), it is the husband's responsibility to ensure that his wife fulfils all of the duties that are associated with marriage.

Life for a single woman was not easy in Elizabethan times, but maybe Elizabeth never married because she did not want to lose her freedom. Upon marriage, the legal system granted the husband complete authority over his wife. She was assimilated into his possessions. The majority of individuals entered into marriage around their mid-to-late twenties. However, it was permissible for males



to marry at 14 and girls at 12 if they had the consent of their parents. Offspring of aristocratic or affluent lineages often wed at a more youthful age than those from lesser socioeconomic backgrounds. This case was because less wealthy couples had to postpone establishing their household until they had accumulated sufficient financial resources or belongings (Gubergritz, 2018).

Women were seen to be less capable than males of managing a home and making choices about right and wrong. The function of a woman in a marriage is likewise quite well-defined. According to the terms of the marriage contract, the woman is obligated to obey her husband. This obedience or submission extends not only to the execution of tasks the husband needs but also to abstain from activities that are displeased to him. Those women who decide to marry, which accounts for the vast majority of the world's female population, accept that their husbands will have complete authority over them. They go from being subject to the authority of their dads to their spouses' authority once they get married (Kumari, 2014).

## 2.2. Education

The sphere of education is one of many other big categories in which men and women varied during the Renaissance from modern times. Most Englishmen and Englishwomen believed that women were not built for intellectual pursuits, with some even saying that women were "framed by God only for domestic duties" (Dunn, 1977, p.15). Not only did women not have access to the same educational opportunities that males had, but they were also assumed to be unable to master the same subjects. "many men seem to have regarded the capacity for rational thought as exclusively male; women, they assumed, were led only by their passions" (Greenblatt, 2015, p.18). Women couldn't separate their emotions from their learning. This view has roots in Renaissance-era scientific ideas about biology. According to the scientific consensus, a woman's coldness makes her more timid and afraid than a guy. And since women are physically fragile, it follows that they are also emotionally and ethically fragile. Because of this archaic understanding of heat as a biological difference, it was widely held that women were subpar to males in all fields, save for housework-related ones.

During that era, women were prohibited from attending formal educational institutions such as schools or colleges. However, The notion that only males were granted admission to grammar school is a fallacy; some females were permitted to enrol as early as the mid-1500s. They had the opportunity to pursue their studies under the guidance of private tutors. Elizabeth had personal instruction from Roger Ascham. Due to the absence of a centralized education system in Elizabethan England, formal education was limited to a select few, mostly males. They were employed in prestigious houses, individually instructed, and trained in etiquette, religious practices, and political abilities. The term "House Cecil" refers to the





residence of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, which gained renown as an educational establishment accommodating up to 20 young men simultaneously. Children from urban and lower-ranking merchant families often received education in modest schools, typically operated by local private entities, municipal authorities, trade unions, or inside their households. The local grammar school, a private educational institution that teaches males Latin grammar and literature, includes sensual dance. A tiny educational institution provides instruction in fundamental English literacy skills, including reading and writing, and maybe introductory mathematical concepts ((Karisma, 2022, p.14).

At that time, a woman's education traditionally focused on acquiring skills such as sewing, painting, dancing, and playing musical instruments. Her main vocation was managing the household and maintaining a cheerful demeanour both in appearance and speech. Curiously, women were the most ardent enthusiasts of books and engaged in reading for enjoyment. In the Elizabethan era, it was seen as emasculating for males to read anything other than books on law, medicine, or tithing. Consequently, almost 80% of all books were acquired and read by women during this period. Undoubtedly, the existence of a woman during the Elizabethan age was desolate. Legally mandated religious fanaticism shaped women into the obedient spouse and nurturing parent archetype. Their lives were boring and difficult since frequent childbirths accelerated their ageing and resulted in premature mortality.

### 2.3. Politics

In Elizabethan England, fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, preachers, judges, and lords controlled all elements of life. Social role control was almost nonexistent for women. The most respectable life is comprised of political and civic duty as well as scholarship. Such a life was unjust for women because a woman's public reputation was bad, indicating immorality and scandal. Women had no access to any major power in society. Men were praised for their attractiveness and classification skills. Men may have turned to trade or liquor during this creative time but turned to visual beauty. They made beauty a vital aspect of life; only males could tell it from the ugly (Gubergritz, 2018).

Women exhibited disparities with males in their capacity to serve as witnesses, create testaments, assume the role of guardians for their offspring, establish agreements, and own, acquire, and transfer property. They lacked legal authority inside their community. The males in their lives, whether their dads or spouses, exercised absolute authority over all constitutional affairs about their lives. Women in the Renaissance era did not have freedom in the sense of enjoying the rights and benefits of a citizen or having an educated capacity for reason, which were both unattainable. Married women had limited rights in society, while single women, whether widowed or unmarried, who were of legal age, could inherit and manage





land, create a will, enter into contracts, own property, and engage in legal proceedings without the need for a male guardian or representative. However, according to the common law, married women were not granted these privileges. By opting to marry, women relinquished their legal and constitutional rights as citizens ((Greenblatt, 2015, p.10).

Women were excluded from pursuing careers in law, medicine, and politics, although they were permitted to engage in domestic service roles such as cooks and maids. No matter their social status, women were not allowed to vote. Only men from a certain social class were allowed to vote. Women were also unable to inherit their father's titles. Inheritance of titles would occur by patrilineal succession, namely from father to son or brother to brother, depending on prevailing conditions. The one exception, without a doubt, was the crown. If a daughter inherits the throne, she would possess a monarch's full authority and grandeur. This case enabled Mary, followed by Elizabeth, to assume the throne. While there were instances when women were not allowed to inherit estates, they might nevertheless become heiresses to property. In particular, women who were the only offspring of prominent aristocratic individuals had the potential to amass significant wealth as heiresses (Shapiro, 1994).

### 3. Women in Renaissance Drama

The Elizabethan period prominently highlighted the emergence of feminist entities, as seen by the representation of women in the plays presented on stage. Stage performance is a special kind of literature compared to literal written texts. Dramas had a crucial role in Elizabethan literature, so the portrayal of women was predicted to influence the general public significantly. A striking connection may be seen between the literature of the Renaissance period and the general condition of patriarchal opposition in society. The continuing lack of women rising to positions of authority and influence is an enduring concept in modern culture. The level of freedom experienced by contemporary women has undeniably increased significantly. Modern literature focusing on marriage and love often depicts male supremacy due to women's little agency in selecting their partners (Adhikari and Birbal, 2021, p.135). During the Elizabethan era, the scarcity of women in plays was addressed using male players to portray female characters. These representations were conventional and well-accepted in the art community. Therefore, it may be deduced that women in the public sphere are characterized by a flexible nature and reduced rigidity in their depiction. The portrayal of women in literature throughout the medieval period was mostly objectified and treated as commodities ((Lucas, 2023, p.8).





#### 4. Shakespeare's portrayal of women

Shakespeare's portrayal of women in his plays reflects his attitudes about women and their societal positions. Examining the many female characters in Shakespeare's plays reveals that women in Shakespearean society had far less autonomy than males. It is well recognized that women were prohibited from performing on stage throughout Shakespeare's active period. Men portrayed his renowned female characters, including Desdemona and Juliette. Female characters in Shakespearean dramas are often undervalued. Although women were constrained by their societal positions, the Bard demonstrated women's capacity to influence the males in their vicinity. His plays showed the disparity in societal expectations between women belonging to the elite and lower classes in that era. Women of noble birth are shown as "objects" to be transferred from fathers to spouses. Typically, they have social limitations and cannot independently investigate their surroundings without supervision. Many of these women were compelled and manipulated by the males. Lower-class women were given more autonomy in their behaviour precisely due to their perceived inferiority to higher-class women (Wright, 1993, pp.3-4).

##### 4.1. In *Hamlet*

Despite the limited presence of female characters in *Hamlet*, namely Ophelia and Gertrude, the play effectively portrays women's profound and unjust challenges throughout history. *Hamlet*, written during the early 17th century, sheds light on women's limitations. It is worth noting that women were prohibited from performing on stage, and the play is set in the Middle Ages. *Hamlet* highlights the biases and obstacles that restricted the options accessible to women, even those of noble lineage. *Hamlet* is intensely preoccupied with the ladies and displays disdain and mockery towards their behaviours. Shakespeare's underlying argument is that these activities, which the women are compelled to do to survive in a harsh, antagonistic, and patriarchal society, are eventually imposed upon them (Samuelsson, 2020, p.12).

Gertrude and Ophelia are two of *Hamlet*'s most enigmatic and undeveloped characters. *Hamlet* himself vehemently criticizes each of them individually, for distinct reasons, in sexist diatribes that accuse women of being cunning temptresses, impostors, and lascivious plotters. *Hamlet* fails to recognize and remember that Gertrude and Ophelia are shaped by their surroundings. They are compelled to make challenging and potentially fatal choices to survive and navigate a politically treacherous society that primarily benefits men rather than women.





When readers first meet Gertrude, they are likely to form an opinion based on Hamlet's reaction to the news that she has married her brother-in-law, who was responsible for the death of her husband. Hamlet exhibits resentment and disappointment towards her, asserting that she should maintain allegiance to his deceased father's legacy, the King. However, there is no substantiated proof of her awareness of the murder perpetrated by Claudius. It seems that she has succumbed to Claudius' seduction. However, it remains unclear whether this seduction occurred before or after the murder of King Hamlet since there is no evidence to support either scenario. Gertrude is facing a dilemma as she is torn between the expectations of several men and the roles they want her to fulfil. She has a certain degree of remorse over her son's disapproval of her but believes that she cannot take any action to address the matter because of her connection with Claudius. Claudius also has certain expectations of her, including his desire for her to ignore Hamlet and show loyalty only to him (Hazlit, 2022).

Like Gertrude's story, Ophelia is pushed into many choices and situations that don't seem to be her own doing. Instead, she feels she has to do them to please the men around her and keep her social standing in court. She is a pawn in a game between men when her father, Polonius, and Claudius use her to spy on Hamlet and try to get him to explain what's making him crazy. Polonius wants to find out if Ophelia is connected to Hamlet's madness, so he tells Ophelia to turn down Hamlet's approaches, return the gifts and letters he's sent her before, and refuse to see or talk to him anymore. This case is to test his theory. When Ophelia does these things, Hamlet gets angry and makes fun of her. Again, like with his mother, he can't see how Ophelia's life is affected by bigger social and political issues, and he doesn't feel sorry for her when she acts in ways that aren't like her (Güneş, 2015).

Ophelia goes crazy after learning that Hamlet killed her father. She goes crazy after Hamlet turns her down, and Laertes leaves her alone (he is studying in France for his future while his sister sits in court by herself). She also has to deal with her father's death, her last social and political support before Hamlet. Even though she is completely crazy, she keeps singing nursery rhymes and giving seemingly invisible flowers to people around her. She does these girly things because she has spent years learning to look and act to please others, especially men. Ophelia may have killed herself because she wanted to control her fate. A woman in court is already in a dangerous situation, but a crazy woman who has no control over anything and is seen as a stranger and a burden is even more difficult. Ophelia kills herself, but she may be doing it to protect her honour and the little control she still has at the end of her life (Gupta and Tiwari, 2017, p.92).





#### 4.2. In Other Plays

Throughout most of his plays, the heroines seem to possess emotional fragility and a sense of inferiority concerning men, and they are subject to male dominance. His play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Hermia is forced to marry Demetrius against her will and her father's wishes, illustrates the powerlessness of women in society. Hermia is in love with Lysander. She must comply with her father's commands and cannot reverse his choice. Demetrius is seen as wealthy and aristocratic compared to Lysander, making him the preferred spouse for Hermia, as deemed by her father. Egeu says: "As she is mine, I may dispose of her: Which shall be either to this gentleman or to her death; according to our law, immediately provided in that case" (Shakespeare, 2019, p.7). Egeu's possessiveness over his daughter represents the Renaissance era's view of women (Gubergritz 2018).

Reflecting the patriarchal beliefs of the Elizabethan age, women in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are often seen as objects of desire and players in men's plots. Hermia's character exemplifies this idea as she goes against her father Egeus's desires to wed Demetrius and says, "I would my father looked but with my eyes" (Shakespeare, 2019, p.8). This case emphasizes her fight for independence against the social norm that women had to adhere to their fathers' decisions.

In the same way, Helena's unreciprocated love for Demetrius underlines women's fragility in front of masculine want. "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind," she mourns (Shakespeare, 2019, p.8), implying that women's value is usually linked to their emotional work instead of their autonomy. Puck and Oberon's magical interventions add to this complexity by manipulating the women's emotions, reducing them to simple instruments for a humorous narrative.

The play's protagonist, the powerful *Lady Macbeth*, is portrayed as evil in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. She is presented as a powerful figure who convinces Macbeth to murder King Duncan. Shakespeare represents her as a power-hungry, ambitious lady:

Glamis thou art, and coward; and shalt be what thou art promised:  
Yet do I feel thy nature; it is too full o' the milk of human kindness  
to catch the Nearest way: thou wouldst be great; art not without  
ambition but without the Illness should attend it. (Shakespeare,  
2001, p.19)

Readers assert that although most of Shakespeare's female characters exhibit vulnerability and dependence, Lady Macbeth defies this pattern. Lady Macbeth's portrayal as a negative character is supported by her display of power, which was not approved by society during the Elizabethan age (Hazlit, 2022).



Shakespeare is known for creating the renowned character Cleopatra. In Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, she is shown with more sympathy. She is subjected to less criticism and a heightened level of empathy. Cleopatra has a resemblance to Elizabeth. She is a queen who is both adored and revered by many but scorned by others, much as Elizabeth was. Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Elizabeth had stubborn will and were not susceptible to manipulation by external forces. In Shakespeare's play, Cleopatra utters the following words:

Sink Rome, their tongue rot that speak against us! A charge We  
bear I 'th' war, and as president of my Kingdom well Appear  
therefore a man. Speak not against it. I will not stay behind.  
(Shakespeare, 2024, pp.15-19)

This comment has a striking resemblance to something that Elizabeth may have spoken. Shakespeare further emphasizes how Cleopatra breaks the established hierarchy of a patriarchal society by behaving aggressively.

In *Othello*, in most cases, women are presented as objects or belongings where the patriarchy of the Elizabethan era is reflected. In the case of the characters Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, a world ordered and commented on by male authority and desire is portrayed overtly (Bell, 1998). These women's treatment features the kinds of power, jealousy, and the worths of objectification.

Othello's wife, Desdemona, is presented in the first scenes as an idealized one of love and virtue. However, except for a few creative inclusions of things damsel-like, her relationship with men dominates her identity. At this point, when she elopes with Othello, her father, Brabantio, feels betrayed, and his only crime is that she has been "stolen" from him, "O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!" (Shakespeare, 2019, pp.128-129). It shows how Desdemona is seen as possessing rather than independent. Loyalty to Othello is her measure of worthiness and her willing obedience to the demands of society. As Othello's jealousy increases, he starts viewing Desdemona not as a partner but as an object of his possession. This objectification is evident in his statement that he must 'see' her infidelity, "I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; / And on the proof, there is no more but this" (Shakespeare, 2019, pp.202-203). In this instance, the need for visual proof highlights Othello's view of Desdemona not as someone who can act but as something that can be scrutinized.

Desdemona's idealization is countered by Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid. In the play, Emilia seems always to understand women's place in society. She notes that women are commodities, "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungrily, and when they are full, / They belch us" (Shakespeare, 2019, pp.111-113). The cynical disposition of Emilia towards men and the way



they regard women is captured in this quote. Her declaration that women also have desires and feelings strains the idea that women only exist to serve men's pleasure.

Bianca, a courtesan in the play, represents another aspect of women's objectification. And she is usually dismissed and treated as an object of lust. Bianca is seen as a person for Lasio to respect, but he does not, "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat—the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (Shakespeare, 2019, pp.308-310). Bianca is reduced in Cassio's line to object of jealousy by his reference to Othello as 'Moor' and the connotation of 'leaping into my seat.' Her role as a courtesan increases her marginalization of society, wherein women are excluded just because of sexual relationships.

## 5. Conclusion

Shakespeare's plays represent women as things, and several female characters represent society at that age. His plays have adhered to the traditions and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan age. However, he maintains the traditional English Renaissance ideals of gender, including their prescribed roles and responsibilities in society. Female characters in his plays exhibit distinct forms of self-assertion. Through their exceptional talent for depicting human behaviour, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, Gertrude, Desdemona and Emilia illustrate women's status in a male-dominated society. These female characters, with their depth and complexity, surpass the constraints of their era, making their stories timeless.

The plays interrogate patriarchal structures that are inherently against her agency. The portrayals also underscore the perilous results of objectification – betrayal, striction, and loss of dentition. Shakespeare's works encourage us to think about gender inequalities and call gender inequalities into question regarding the use of women as mere possessions. Shakespeare's female characters appear ceaselessly in our world, where males have experienced shaping men and look from every angle. Still, they were resilient and complex, which always evokes discussions of gender and power.





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### المستخلص

وفقاً للمسرح الشكسبيري، لطالما تم التعامل مع النساء كأشياء أو ممتلكات بسبب القيم الأبوية التي كانت سائدة في العصر الإليزابيثي. تميل الشخصيات النسائية إلى البقاء ضمن حدود رغبات الرجال وتوقعات المجتمع، مما يجعلهن موضوعات للتشويه والتهميش. فعلى سبيل المثال، تُظهر الشخصيات النسائية في مسرحياته أشكالاً متميزة من التعبير عن الذات. ومن خلال براعته الاستثنائية في تصوير السلوك البشري، تجسد كل من السيدة ماكبث، وأوفيليا، وجرتروود، ويزديمونة، وإميليا مكانة المرأة في مجتمع يهيمن عليه الذكور. إن عمق هذه الشخصيات وتعقيدها يتجاوزان القيود الزمنية التي كُتبت فيها، مما يجعل قصصهن خالدة.

وينتج عن هذا التشويه عواقب مأساوية، تتراوح بين الخيانة وفقدان الهوية. تدعو أعمال شكسبير الجمهور إلى فحص أبعاد الأدوار الجندرية وتأثير البنى الاجتماعية المستمر على حياة النساء. كما تتناول مسرحياته القيم الاجتماعية التي تُشكّل صورة المرأة من منظور ذكوري، ويدعو جمهوره للتفكير في قضايا النوع الاجتماعي والسلطة. ومن خلال تصويره للنساء بهذا الشكل، يُظهر شكسبير كيف يُقيد البناء الاجتماعي للمرأة، وكيف تحافظ على كرامتها داخل النظام نفسه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التشويه، النظام الأبوي، الهوية، شكسبير، الأدوار الجندرية.





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