

What Roles Do Women Have in the Political Worlds in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*?

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the important role of female characters in the political world in William Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. By analyzing Queen Gertrude, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and the three witches, the paper reveals the influence of women in the political realm and the limitations they face. Centering on *Hamlet*, the essay begins by analysing Gertrude's influence on the Danish political landscape and Ophelia's dilemma in the struggle for male power. The article then turns to *Macbeth* to explore how Lady Macbeth's ambitions for power and the witches' supernatural abilities influence Macbeth's political decisions. The article points out that despite their political potential and influence, these female characters remain constrained by patriarchy and are often seen as tools in the male power struggle. Finally, the essay summarises the common themes and differences between the female characters in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and reflects on the place of women in the political world and the challenges they face. Through an in-depth analysis of female characters in Shakespeare's works, this thesis aims to deepen the understanding of women's experiences in political struggles, as well as their efforts to attain power and self-actualization in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Female Characters; *Hamlet*; *Macbeth*; *Shakespeare*; Women.

1. Introduction

In William Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, female characters play significant roles in the political world. We can see the involvement of women in politics and their influence through the characters such as Queen Gertrude, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and the witches. These women have their unique impact on politics, but they are also constrained in a world dominated by patriarchal structures. By exploring these female characters, we can get a better understanding of the impact of women in political struggles and the great challenges they face.

In this essay, I first focus on *Hamlet* and intend to analyse Queen Gertrude's impact on Denmark's political landscape, and Ophelia's dilemma in the political struggle between male characters. Then I move on to *Macbeth*, exploring Lady Macbeth's ambitions for power, as well as the witches' supernatural abilities and how they influence Macbeth's political decisions. Furthermore, I make a conclusion of women characters in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and try to find common themes and differences in what roles women play in politics. In the end, I aim to reflect on the broader implications of women's situation in the political world. Through this essay, I seek to acquire a deeper comprehension of women's status, as well as the difficulties they confront on the political stage in Shakespearean works.

2. Female Characters in *Hamlet*

Although women are usually powerless and play a limited role in political life, they can still exert their influence on the royal regime. As Jo Merrey asserts, 'Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been at least nominally successful as part of the royal body politic by bearing a son to continue the royal line. By contrast, as Hamlet's intended (at least putatively) bride, the younger Ophelia is a potential role to play as a new, although non-royal, carrier of the prince's blood line. As a non-royal woman, Ophelia might be able to

advance socially and politically, attaining a measure of the royal body through marriage and procreation.'

[7] From this, we can see that Gertrude, as a queen, inherits the royal blood by giving birth to her son. It reveals the traditional value of women in politics is embodied through the procreation and maintenance of the royal lineage. In contrast, Ophelia, as a non-royal woman, also has the opportunity to rise politically through marriage and childbearing, which demonstrates the importance of marriage for women in the political arena. However, this route to political advancement is still attached to men, which is essentially a reflection of a patriarchal society. Once their marriage breaks down, women will lose their voice in politics. Thus, it does not mean security, and women's status still remains precarious. It shows women face many challenges and uncertainties in politics, and they are in a weak position in the political world.

As a matter of fact, Ophelia has always been passive in the political world. As Sajal Sarkar contends, 'She was always obedient to her father and brother in the play. Ophelia's submissiveness becomes evident when she first appears in the play. Her brother Laertes tells her that Hamlet's apparent love for her is merely lust and that she should be on her guard against it. She readily agrees to do so. When he has gone and her father speaks to her on the same subject, she puts up a feeble resistance which collapses in an instant. When her father expressly forbids her to see Hamlet again, she yields without any struggle.'

[8] It shows Ophelia's obedience to authority in her family relationships. Her position in the family is dictated by her father and brother, and she has no autonomy over her feelings and behaviours. She does not rebel against her family's words, which further reflects the social expectations of women at the time. Apart from Ophelia's father and brother, the King also regards Ophelia as a decoy, and wants to use her to reveal Hamlet's hidden thoughts, for the purpose of maintaining his position. However, Hamlet just aims to take revenge for his father, so he no longer cares about his love for Ophelia. Thus, when Ophelia appears before Hamlet full of joy, she does not

know that in Hamlet's eyes, she has become a spy of the enemy. Hamlet even declares to Ophelia that he never loved her before. Ophelia feels confused and frightened. She gets lost in the complicated political conflict.

In addition, I think that the reason why Ophelia becomes the victim of this political struggle has a lot to do with the environment. Ophelia has lived in a conservative family since childhood. She is extremely innocent and kind, but at the same time, she is also submissive and weak, and would only be subject to the discipline of her father and brother. When Ophelia is in love with Hamlet, her father is desperate to suppress Hamlet, because he aims to defend the interests of the new king, Claudius. Thus, he is firmly opposed to Ophelia's connection with Hamlet. Confronted with the double torture of love and family affection, Ophelia becomes extremely painful and tangled, which leads to her loss of individual independence in this political struggle. As a result, she is forced to give up her relationship with Hamlet, and becomes a tool manipulated by her father and the king for their political goals.

Compared to Ophelia, as another important female character in *Hamlet*, Gertrude plays a vital role in politics. As the mother of Prince Hamlet and the wife of King Claudius, she wields authority and influence within the royal family, although she does not directly participate in political decisions. For instance, Mesut Güneç asserts that 'she is guilty of theoretically taking away Hamlet's heirship: the command of Denmark. Because Gertrude has married Claudius, who is the king of Denmark, Hamlet cannot get the kingdom directly' (Graf, 2013: 27). Instead of this; the kingdom will pass the heir of Claudius and Gertrude's unification.' [4] This explains why Hamlet is so angry with his mother's behaviour. Gertrude's marriage not only affects Hamlet's personal destiny, but also has a profound effect on the political landscape of the entire kingdom. It leads to a shift in power and intensifies the complexity of family relationships, which will influence the future of the entire Danish royal family.

In support of this viewpoint, Mesut Güneç further explains that 'Gertrude's situation gives her possibility to alter the heritage of the authority in Denmark, and this situation provides her an amazing power. By the help of this power she can be a danger to males in her society however, the society does not allow Gertrude to use her power.' [4] That is to say, Gertrude has a potential threat to the rule of the patriarchal society. Nevertheless, although Gertrude has the ability to change the succession of the ruling power in Denmark, she cannot really exert this potential influence due to the restriction and intolerance of female power in the society. As a woman, she is expected to conform to certain codes of conduct and ethics, which limit her ability to exert full influence in the political sphere. It reflects the limitations and obstacles of women in politics, as well as the suppression of women's power in the patriarchal society.

Based on the previous discussion, it can be seen that Gertrude also occupies a passive position in politics, because she is manipulated and controlled by male characters, especially Claudius and Hamlet. She marries Claudius after the death of King Hamlet, which cements Claudius's throne. As Mesut Güneç states, 'Claudius exploits Gertrude to be more powerful to get the throne. We observe that a man uses a woman's feelings to success his aims; to reach his target.' [4] From this, we can see that some men regard women as instruments for their political domination. They use women's

affection to achieve their own goals and success, which reflects the subordinate position of women in the political society at that time. Her devotion to Claudius shows her unconditional obedience to her husband's authority, which highlights the social demands on women to be chaste at the time.

Unfortunately, Gertrude finally dies because she drinks a cup of poisoned wine originally prepared for Hamlet. At this point, Gertrude becomes Hamlet's "scapegoat", which further implies that she is a victim of male struggles and a "scapegoat" of political intrigue. In fact, what causes the death of Gertrude is not only the poisoned wine, but the political conspiracy and persecution of the patriarchal society. Gertrude remarries the younger brother of the former king, which is not accepted by the public in the patriarchal society. Thus, Gertrude becomes the pioneer, breaking the rules and trying to gain the same power as men. But apparently, she fails. Men suppress her with a more arrogant attitude, and the proud women ultimately die in the political plot.

Likewise, Ophelia also chooses to end her life, which is another tragedy for women. Nevertheless, it can also be regarded as a resistance of women against the political society at that time. As Elizabeth Mazzola states, 'Shakespeare represents female suicide as a deliberate act of rebellion rather than evidence of despair or depression.' [6] In traditional political systems, women are often marginalised or deprived of power and participation in political affairs. However, when Ophelia chooses suicide as an act of resistance, she expresses her dissatisfaction and resistance to this system. By committing suicide, she tries to break through the established social restrictions and norms and show her own subjectivity and autonomy. In this way, the suicide of women can be seen as a challenge and protest against the unjust system. By choosing to end their own lives, women try to pursue freedom and relief in death.

3. Female Characters in *Macbeth*

In the play, three witches appear in the moors, which reflects the marginal position of women in political society. It seems that the mainstream society is alien to them. The appearance of the witches is accompanied by thunder and lightning, representing the chaos of the natural order. Shakespeare's portrayal of witches is in fact interpreted as a group of marginalised women who do not want to be oppressed, and use witchcraft to challenge the existing order. As reflected in the play, the witches continually seduce Macbeth into challenging the patriarchal society represented by Lincoln and others. Although the witches have certain superpowers, these superpowers do not, however, enable them to challenge patriarchal society directly. They can only use Macbeth to achieve their goals. The witches lure him with prophecies to incite his ambition, and then make Macbeth murder the king and seize the throne. As we all know, the throne has always been seen as a symbol of the existing political order, and the inheritance of a son is the best expression of that order. If witches aim to challenge the established order, they must manage to destroy such traditions. Indeed, despite the great efforts of witches to break the rule of the kingdom, they lead to another harsher order. Because the witches have stimulated Macbeth's political ambitions, but they are unable to control the expanding desires of Macbeth and his wife and stop their heading toward tyranny. Thus, the witches contribute to the establishment of a more brutal and unstable political order. In this sense, it is a failure

of women in the struggle against male domination. Moreover, if we take “the kingdom changes hands” as a victory for the witches, this victory is shattered at the end of the play. Thus, even if the witches achieve victory against male supremacy to some extent, this victory is still unsustainable.

Therefore, Shakespeare gives deep connotations when he portrays three witches. The witches in the play are not only agents of evil and darkness, but also marginal female victims of a patriarchal society. Although the witches have powerful strength, it is ultimately exploited and manipulated by male characters. The witches’ prophetic and manipulative powers are used by Macbeth and other male characters to achieve their power desires and political goals. The witches themselves do not gain real power or status. It reflects the fact that women in politics are often seen as tools rather than real participants or decision-makers. In the political world at that time, they have no right to speak directly. Their seduction of Macbeth is nothing less than an unrelenting rebellion against the social order.

Compared to the three witches, the role of Lady Macbeth is different. She is at the top and centre of political society, which makes her hunger for power. She chases after power at all costs, and she makes every effort to infiltrate the political society so that she can gain as much political power as possible. As she says to Macbeth with a strong tone,

‘Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would"
Like the poor cat i' the adage?’ (1.7.43-49)[1]

From this, it can be observed that Lady Macbeth shows her knowledge and insight into Macbeth’s heart, and she is able to see her husband’s inner contradictions and fears. Compared to Macbeth’s indecision, she displays an extremely firm character and a forthright manner. She is unafraid to confront Macbeth’s inner struggles. Moreover, through subtle metaphors and analogies, Lady Macbeth points out Macbeth’s hesitation and cowardice, making him realise that he needs to overcome his fears. This shows that Lady Macbeth is good at using the power of words to incite Macbeth. She takes advantage of Macbeth’s indecisiveness in character, and makes Macbeth tormented inwardly through stimulating words, so that Macbeth doubts himself, and is encouraged by her words, then he can finally achieve the goal that Lady Macbeth wants.

In this way, Lady Macbeth is undoubtedly a tactical woman. As S. L. Fifield contends, ‘If, though, an easily swayed or malleable man was in a place of power, a woman could take control despite society’s perception of her as a primary means of reproduction.’[3] At this point, Lady Macbeth shatters the stereotype that traditional women can only have influence in the family. She uses her eloquence and psychological manipulation to inspire Macbeth’s ambitions, prompting him to murder the king. Even though women are in a weak position in the political world, and they face a lot of challenges, women can still use their intelligence to achieve political goals. Thus, it reveals the huge potential of women in politics.

In the struggle for power, Lady Macbeth also faces lots of moral and psychological predicaments, which force her to take some extreme measures. For example, when she discusses with Macbeth her plan to assassinate King Duncan,

she mentions that she has given birth to a child but she wants to kill him. As she recalls,

‘I have given suck and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me-
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash'd the brains out had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.’(1.7.60-65)[1]

Such a cruel act by Lady Macbeth highlights her powerless and passive position in the male-dominated political world. This behavior can be seen as a rebellion against traditional gender roles and social expectations, demonstrating her desire to try to break restraints and fight for more power in politics. As Janna Hooke asserts, ‘Chamberlain would read this reference to infanticide as tapping into a potent female power channel, motherhood, to threaten and undermine the authority of patrilineage.’[5] It suggests that women can use their unique fertility and parenting roles to subvert traditional political authority. This behavior not only challenges the power structure, but also redefines the influence of women in politics, revealing the potential of motherhood as a powerful political force.

However, based on this viewpoint, Janna Hooke further contends that ‘Lady Macbeth assumes a cold, indifference to violence, drawing upon notions of masculinity established earlier in the play. Infanticide symbolizes her figurative rejection of motherhood as a channel to social ascension altogether. Instead, she cloaks herself with that which is undeniably male in order to achieve that which her sex could traditionally only obtain through the production of heirs.’[5]

It suggests that Lady Macbeth tries to gain power and status in the political field by imitating the behaviors and traits of men, breaking through the constraints and restrictions of traditional gender roles. Traditionally, women gain social status and power by bearing heirs, but Lady Macbeth chooses to abandon this traditional order. Thus, the infanticide is seen as a symbol of her rejection of the maternal role. She seeks to gain recognition and success in the social and political spheres by embracing masculine traits. From a political perspective, Lady Macbeth’s decision to kill the baby could be interpreted as a deliberate move by her to eliminate any potential threat to her and Macbeth’s quest for power. By killing the child, she ensures that there would be no heir to challenge their position or claim to the throne. This ruthless behaviour shows that Lady Macbeth is willing to take extreme measures to secure their political ambitions and consolidate their power. For the pursuit of power, Lady Macbeth chooses to play a more hard and even cruel role in the male-dominated world of politics.

To explain why Lady Macbeth has to abandon her maternal traits to achieve political goals, Stephanie Chamberlain claims, ‘Mark Thornton Burnett argues that *Macbeth* explores “the attempts of a woman to realize herself by using the dominant discourses of patriarchy as she lacks an effectively powerful counter-language” (1993, 2).’[2] It suggests that women are often subject to male-dominated discourse and structures, and lack autonomy and power. As a result, Lady Macbeth seeks to achieve her goals and aspirations by adopting a male-dominated way of speaking in the political sphere, rather than through her own voice and opinions. Moreover, it also reveals Lady Macbeth’s struggles as a female character in the political arena. It highlights that in a male-dominated political environment, women are forced to rely on male discourse and structures, and find it difficult to

find their own voice and power, thus limiting their role and space for development in politics.

Despite these limitations women have in the political world, their status as mothers can still pose a threat to traditional patriarchal society. As Stephanie Chamberlain argues, 'That mothers could undermine patrilineal outcomes, in fact, contributed to a generalized cultural anxiety about women's roles in the transmission of patrilineage. That patrilineage could be irreparably altered through marital infidelity, nursing, and infanticide rendered maternal agency a social and political concern.' [2] From this, we can find that traditionally, patrilineal succession is very crucial, and the mother, as the child's first educator and caregiver, has the potential influence to change the patrilineal succession. For example, Lady Macbeth's constant encouragement and the witches' prophecies propel Macbeth to take the throne by murdering Duncan. In this case, these female characters indirectly influence Macbeth's fate and succession to the throne. What is more, although Macbeth has seized the throne by murdering Duncan, this act was not based on orthodox succession, but on violence and fraud, so it lacks legitimacy and stability. As a result, Macbeth is ultimately unable to succeed in inheriting the patrilineal succession. Thus, it breaks the traditional rules of succession to the throne. In view of this, we can find that women can pose a threat to traditional political structures.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussions, we can find that In *Hamlet*, Ophelia and Gertrude fail to survive in the patriarchal society of the Elizabethan era. Therefore, they are usually considered as victims of revenge and struggles in the political world. At that time, women are silent and unable to play an active role in the world of patriarchy. Unfortunately, they are manipulated as a tool for men to achieve their political goals. Nevertheless, Ophelia and Gertrude attempt to fight against the oppressive environment in their own way. For example, Ophelia expresses her dissatisfaction with patriarchal oppression through her suicide, while Gertrude expresses her protest by sacrificing her life for Hamlet. The two female characters deeply reveal the dilemmas and challenges faced by women in the political field at that time, as well as their efforts to fight and resist such oppression in different ways. The tragic fate of these two women echoes the social restrictions on women's status and power at that time, and

also shows their spirit of resistance to the unjust system.

In *Macbeth*, it is undeniable that female characters like Lady Macbeth who are quite resourceful indeed play a certain political role. Lady Macbeth is not just a spouse who is subordinate to her husband, but a character with the ability to think and act independently. She influences the political situation through her own efforts and determination. In addition, the three witches also use supernatural powers to try to influence politics. However, they have always been marginalized roles in a patriarchal society, unable to participate directly in politics.

In a nutshell, based on our discussion of female characters in the two plays, we can get an understanding of the oppression women face in traditional political life, and the limited power they exert under this oppression. It demonstrates how women are oppressed at the time by the patriarchal society and the obstacles they have to overcome in order to achieve power, autonomy, and self-realization.

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