

Shakespeare's Shifting Portrayal of Women: A Comparative Analysis of Comedies and Tragedies

Tingting Tan *

School of Humanities, Jinan University, Zhuhai, 519000, China

* Corresponding Author Email: tantt@stu2021.jnu.edu.cn

Abstract. From a feminist perspective, this paper compares the image of women in Shakespeare's four great tragedies and four great comedies. Through an in-depth analysis of the female characters in these plays, we can see that Shakespeare has a unique perspective and expression on the portrayal of women. In general, the female characters in Shakespeare's four tragedies and four great comedies show different characteristics and destinies. In the four major tragedies, the female figure often plays an important role, but their fate is often limited and manipulated by male power, becoming the second sex. This shackle of fate prevents them from truly controlling their lives and destinies. In contrast, the female figures in the Big Four Comedies are more autonomous and independent. Not only did they have intelligence and courage, but they also showed humor and wit. This difference can be attributed to Shakespeare's acknowledgement of evolving women's empowerment during the humanist movement. While he aims to present women positively, the limitations of the era lead to more restricted roles for them in tragedies, given their complex themes.

Keywords: Shakespeare, feminism, Renaissance.

1. Introduction

Since women have historically been considered the inferior sex, there are many different forms of inequality. A wave of the Renaissance in the 14th century demanded a human-centered approach; at this time, women wrote within the tradition but opposed to its core, using the feminine voice to influence literature [1]. The same period's authors also represented women in their writings according to a new ideal they had for them.

Shakespeare's four great comedies and four great tragedies, which are being performed today all over the world, retain a significant place in the history of literature and are considered timeless masterpieces that may be passed on to a future generation of humanists. An in-depth examination of the female characters in Shakespeare's plays can aid in identifying and analyzing the gender politics present in them and illuminating the gender roles and power dynamics. Shakespeare's female characters are varied and nuanced, and they exhibit a range of personalities and desires. Feminist studies can help readers focus on the characters' psychological and emotional development and better understand women's role-playing and self-identity in the works. As well as being able to investigate and comprehend the restrictions, oppressions, and expectations placed on women in the society of the time and take into account the importance of these works for current gender issues.

Shakespeare's feminism is a topic that has been studied extensively, and different academics have come to different views. There are, however, a few significant findings that are well-known among academics. Many academics think Shakespeare's writings reveal the truth about the patriarchal society of the time and the condition of the frequently oppressed and disenfranchised women inside it. However, some female characters show resiliency against the patriarchal society and the capacity to acquire and wield authority through cunning means. Although the study of Shakespearean feminism has been going on for a while and has generated much scholarship, there are some research gaps. For example, there are not as many comparative approaches to analyzing various female characters facing the same issue and determining the author's intentions by comparing their choices.

2. Women's Image in the Four Great Comedies

The four great comedies give women a starring role and more of a humanist attitude as women struggle for independence and rights. The most notable example is Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*, who represents feminism on two levels. The onset of self-consciousness is the first stage. Portia had to obey her father's instructions to "choose a husband from three boxes" to find her future husband because, at the time, women were subject to patriarchal authority before getting married. This process was an arbitrary imposition of the dead father's will on the live daughter's will, a resistance to the intense love that could develop between young people [2]. Such persecution awakens her, and in the presence of suitors she does not admire, she influences them to make the wrong decision while implying that Bassanio, whom she loves, is correct. This is actually her subtle attempt to oppose achieving marital autonomy.

The second stage is the struggle for discourse. The speech contest is at the second level. Suppose the awakening of consciousness just occurs at the level of thought. In that case, Portia also puts it into practice when she poses as a male to represent Antonio in court and assist him with his legal issues. Portia is unfazed by Shylock's sharp and challenging questions in the courtroom and instead prevents Shylock from winning by providing a rigid interpretation of the law. She upholds the laws of Venice while simultaneously defending Antonio[3].

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia faces a similar predicament in that her father is holding off on getting her married because he believes that Hermia is at his disposal in accordance with ancient tradition. If she refused, he would have her executed right away. Hermia, however, is unfazed and chooses to show her disobedience by fleeing with her lover, Lysander. In "All's Well That Ends Well", Rosaline exhibits great audacity. She spends her days in the abandoned woodland pretending to be a guy in order to escape her uncle's harassment of her and to follow Orlando. Eventually, she benefits from her love. *Twelfth Night* sarcastically reveals that while male desire is solipsistic and unsuccessful, pursuing women is more sophisticated and complex by showing the courting of Marvolio and others. For instance, although having a comparable rank to Marvolio, Maria is spared from punishment by marrying a nobleman. Such unions question the tenets of class and gender hierarchy by portraying lower-class women as superior to upper-class men [4].

To sum up, the female characters in Shakespeare's comedies have distinct personalities and control over their fates and are changed by their decisions. Shakespeare praises the women's beauty, wit, and bravery in all four main comedies, giving them a character grandeur that rivals the male characters.

3. Women in the Four Great Tragedies

Unlike the female characters in the four great comedies who can compete with men, the women in the four great tragedies have outstanding qualities but are relatively flat. In a patriarchal society, women are objectified, and men usually stand in the position of the subject. On the one hand, they are objects of beauty, and a good woman is beautiful, and beauty can gain sensual pleasure. On the other hand, they are the object of male domination and subjugation. Women exist as dependents, and purity, fidelity, and suppleness are indispensable qualities of good women [5]. Such characteristics are reflected in the female characters in the four major tragedies.

The female characters in the four great tragedies can be roughly divided into two types; the first one is beautiful and pure but also suffers a lot because of it. The representative ones are Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello*. Desdemona is gentle, sensual, and sensible while having an honourable status that is in line with the standard model of a wife. She also pursues a free marriage and rebels against her father. She secretly marries Othello, which is actually a rebellion against patriarchal authority. However, she is oppressed by her husband after marriage and is suspected of cheating by her husband, which she pleads for, but is still strangled to death on the bed in the end. On the other hand, Emilia has been under the lustful authority of her rapist husband, and her subjective consciousness is suppressed, playing the image of a meek wife with no subjective consciousness. Although she finally

tells the truth despite her husband's obstruction, her fate is extremely tragic, and she is stabbed to death by Iago.

The second type is the female character, seen as the embodiment of evil, represented by Lady Macbeth and Lear's two daughters, Goneril, and Jotrud, the mother of Regan and Hamlet. Lady Macbeth is the instigator and accomplice of Macbeth's regicide and usurpation, confident and contemptuous of Macbeth's suffering. Shakespeare portrays her as the embodiment of pure evil, but not without losing the three-dimensionality of the character, reduced to a flat surface or just a hand that guides the focused portrayal of Macbeth to act in the direction of the plot. As for the queen in Hamlet, Jodlut, her characterization exists more in Hamlet's words than in her performance with deeds, and in Act I, Scene II, Hamlet has a long soliloquy accusing his mother of remarrying so quickly. In this way, Chotelut is seen as a frivolous woman. However, the reader also has no way of knowing if she is being threatened and forced into such a role, but only establishes a one-dimensional image from her words.

It can be summarized that the female characters in Shakespeare's four great tragedies present a polarised situation, with one part presenting pure goodness, persisting in expressing her love even when verbally abused by her husband; such goodness is actually a kind of subservience to the power of the husband and pandering to the male gaze. The other is pure evil, unchaste, motherless, and ambitious. Both types appear flat and stereotypical, existing only to affect the male characters, losing the diverse and three-dimensional parts.

4. Comparison

Although Shakespeare wrote many plays, it is easy to see that the issues that female characters in those plays face in real life are universal. Therefore, the analysis will focus on the various decisions that various women made when faced with the same issue to highlight their differences.

4.1. Facing male oppression

They all experience oppression from patriarchal authority and husband power due to how men define and value women in the context of the gender binary system. The principal manifestation of patriarchal oppression is the deprivation of female characters' marriage autonomy. While Ophelia is coerced by her father and older brother to avoid Hamlet, Hermia is compelled by her father to wed the powerful Dimitrios. Although both are under their father's influence, they behave drastically differently.

In the presence of the Duke of Theseus, Hermia's father asks the Duke to make decisions for him, arguing that Hermia is his one piece of property, which he can dispose of as he pleases according to Ancient Greek law, and that he wants to transfer such a right to Dimitrios through marriage. The object of her marriage was determined by her father, with the Duke of Theseus and Dimitrios at his side in threatening intimidation and sweet enticement. Whatever their tactics, the goal is to manipulate Hermia's life. However, Hermia does not submit; she is not afraid of power. She faces the Duke without humbling herself by asking what will happen if she refuses to marry, and is also firm in her will when she learns that it is either death or becoming a nun, unwilling to offer her virginity to someone whom her heart does not respect. As a noble lady, she is determined to flee with Lassander, undaunted by the hardships and dangers she might face if she elopes.

On the other hand, Ophelia in Hamlet displays a very different attitude. In the third scene of the first act, Rael teaches his sister not to believe in Hamlet's love, not to lose her body easily, to stay away from the temptation of lust, and to be clean and self-loving. At this time, in addition to promising down, Ophelia still can reply Brother, and do not be tempted by these. When Polonius comes, his tone is harsher and more condescending. He reduces Ophelia to an immature little girl, an innocent baby, and sums up Hamlet's truthfulness as deception. At the end of the conversation, he demands that Ophelia cut ties with Hamlet, emphasizing that this is an order and that Ophelia must do it.

Moreover, the scene ends with her obsequious reply[6]. She follows her father's orders to the letter in every meeting with Hamlet thereafter to verify that Hamlet is truly just crazy about love.

The two face the same situation; their fathers are unhappy with their lovers and try to manipulate their marriages. However, Hermia makes a firm stand against it, thus unfolding the marvellous encounters that follow, while Ophelia chooses to be submissive and commits suicide by madness.

4.2. Perception of self

Women's perceptions of self also differ greatly in comedy and tragedy. In the tragedy Othello, Desdemona's perception of self shows a stereotype of women in feudal society. In Act IV, Othello confronts Desdemona with Iago's lie. When he asks, "Who are you?" Desdemona replies that she wishes to be a virtuous and chaste wife in the eyes of her honourable husband. When Othello speaks ill of her and calls her a whore, Desdemona only weeps silently after he leaves, feeling sorry for herself and believing that it is her bad fate. When Othello tries to strangle her in Act V, she vainly pleads that she has not cheated on him, that she has not given away her handkerchief, and prays for mercy from Othello and the heavens. On the one hand, although she pursues free love, she makes love and marriage her only and most important goal in life. On the other hand, when her husband appears to be jealous, she reacts with reassurance and falls into the trap of self-evidence. This is, in effect, her automatically limiting and checking her behaviour with the moral norms of the patriarchal society[7].

In the comedy A Midsummer Night's Dream, on the other hand, even though Helena is a woman in love with Dimitrios who, in his opinion, does not value her chastity, she intolerably complains about Lassander's teasing of her when he confesses his love for her under the effect of the drugged juice, believing that it is too disrespectful for her.

A comparison of the two reveals that when confronted with disrespect, Desdemona chooses to engage in self-evidence, eager to plead her innocence and secure her chastity, ignoring Othello's unwarranted suspicions and not accusing him of slander. However, Helena does not face Lassander's sudden and frivolous advances with "soft and harmless" emotions such as bewilderment or confusion but rather accuses him of being frivolous and unreasonable in quickly changing his object of pursuit, demonstrating a strong sense of self-esteem.

5. Comparative results

Feminist values are evident in the four great comedies. In the four great comedies, Shakespeare highlights women's desire for freedom and equality, both in the theme of marriage and personal destiny, emphasizing that women should be treated as free individuals equal to men. He demonstrates a deep and observable relationship about the power relationship between men and women. This relationship is revealed through their endless tension throughout the play and their competition for superiority. These women challenge their male counterparts to express themselves boldly and live differently from traditional gender stereotypes. The female characters challenge the traditional negative stereotypes of male dominance, weak silence, and naivety. Shakespeare advocates gender equality and departs from the notion that female characters are inferior[8]. This part is unquestionable.

Instead, female characters in the four major tragedies appear flat and polarised. While the male characters in the Four Tragedies are complex and contradictory, the female characters' personality factors are simple and distinct, showing a unidirectionality, good or evil.

Despite the feminist values embodied in All's Well That Ends Well, several parts still reveal the stereotypical ideas of a patriarchal society. For example, in All's Well That Ends Well, the cross-dressing Rosaline indicates that she is only wearing a man's costume rather than becoming a real man when she presses Celia for news of Orlando, the implication being that women tend to be more blinkered in their relationships, unlike men who are sensible and objective. Shah also values women's appearance and focuses on their chastity, using many lines in both Four Joys and Four Sorrows to extol the heroine's beauty and good character and define a good woman in terms of the male gaze.

The reason for this disparity is inseparable from the author's own experience and the context of the time. Since England was ruled by a female ruler at the time, Elizabeth I, the importance of women, gender, and sexuality in literary creation cannot be ignored[9]. Although the Renaissance advocated humanism, such as "freedom" and "equality", the social discipline of women was still deeply rooted, and chastity and obedience were still regarded as the virtues expected of women. Shakespeare undoubtedly noticed the oppression of women, and therefore, in his comedies, he was happy to portray outstanding women who were rich in humanistic ideas and gave them some "deviant" qualities. However, looking deeper, it can be seen that there are certain conditions for them to utilize their talents - dressing up as men or in an unrealistic environment. *The Merchant of Venice*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Twelfth Night* all feature cross-dressing, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *All's Well That Ends Well* all take place in forests far from the world. Cross-dressing is an expression of a rebellious attitude, but the fact that women have to complete their self-expression with the help of men's identities itself illustrates the inequality of discourse, and the stories that take place in a forest far away from the world have a dreamy atmosphere, which contrasts with real life to a certain extent.

The four great comedies were written before the four great tragedies. When the four great tragedies were written, it was already at the late stage of the reign of the Elizabethan dynasty, the society had become darker, and the author saw a more miserable social reality in this period. So, his style changed. However, this shift reflects his indelible masculinist perspective limited by the times, i.e. men are the dominant force to save society, while female characters can only be reduced to a part of their lives.

Shakespeare's attempt to portray women in a diverse and three-dimensional way, making them like real women in real life, is also a concentrated manifestation of his humanistic concern in many of his works. As a great artist of the Renaissance, Shakespeare's characters all show his incomparable insight and artistic talent, so in the era when the concept of "feminism" did not yet exist, the shadow of feminism can be seen in his works, some scholars have labeled Shakespeare himself as an "original feminist". However, it is clear that Shakespeare lived in a typical patriarchal society and was more or less exposed to the radiation of dominant ideas, which were invisible and often unconsciously imported into his works. This also explains why some of Shakespeare's works, at the dawn of feminism, were inevitably annihilated by the pervasive patriarchal consciousness [10].

6. Conclusion.

The significant contrast between female roles in Shakespearean comedies and tragedies primarily revolves around the extent of their control over their destinies. In comedies, women display greater self-awareness and actively pursue self-expression, while in tragedies, they often assume more submissive roles, influenced by male counterparts. This divergence can be attributed to Shakespeare's acknowledgment of evolving women's rights and his positive portrayal of them through a humanistic lens. However, contextual limitations hindered complete emancipation, leading to flattened female character dynamics within tragic overarching narratives.

This study's essence lies in juxtaposing the struggles and self-perceptions of primarily female characters from the *Four Joys* and *Four Sorrows* against male dominance. This endeavour seeks to unearth Shah's underlying principles embedded in their portrayal. Acknowledging constraints tied to character analysis resulting from spatial limitations is essential, thereby yielding a preliminary comparison. Future research could encompass a broader selection of characters, delving into varied facets, thereby enhancing the comprehension of feminism interwoven into Shakespeare's literary fabric.

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