



**Sudan University of Science and Technology
College of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research
College of Languages**

Women as Tragic Heroes in Shakespeare's Tragedies

By: Rania Muhammed Elbashir Rahama (1) and Mahmoud Ali Ahmed (2)

Abstract:

In the present paper the author sets out to investigate the role of women in Shakespeare's tragedies. William Shakespeare continued to be held high in esteem and admiration despite the passing of the years for quite a number of reasons. He is one the greatest dramatists the world has ever known that his plays continued to be displayed in the world's renowned theatres though the themes they have portrayed have been of strong relevance five hundred years ago. His perfect grasp of human nature and man's psyche has been one of the factors behind his success. He was able to grapple with some certain universal qualities of personality which he skillfully applied to his characters that remained celebrated across the centuries. In this thesis which sets out to handle thematic elements of murder, the researcher has managed to investigate certain play (Macbeth) with specific reference to the female role in bringing about the calamities of the individuals involved. The ultimate aim is to find out how Shakespeare had managed to build up the theme of murder. The recurring reference to supernatural elements helped drive his themes to the intended end beyond question the value of these ghostly elements. Freudian's theory of psychoanalysis was touched upon as was unavoidable in such kind of project. The theory was found to be particularly much more applicable with Lady Macbeth whose conscience sways to and fro to give her the most painful moments of her life. Lady Macbeth was

diagnosed by many critics as developing pathological fear that betrayed her conspiracy in the murder of King Duncan. In Othello, both Iago and Othello carry the seeds of a mental illness not mention that of Desdemona. Hamlet was such an exemplification mental disorder that he himself started to question his faculties. His mother Gertrude was seen journeying from one end of loving her son and have pity on him to another extreme point of loving Claudius. Ophelia, who was in genuine emotional relationship with Hamlet, was forced and under coercion expressed her hatred to Hamlet. All the characters involved have their psychopathic element including the Ghost Hamlet who orders his son to have mercy on his mother as she was naive. The characters in the selected plays as regards their struggle in life, they sometimes bid success and sometimes their lives are full of pain, suffering and failure, echoing real life. It is this which substantially elongated the works of Shakespeare.

Key words: *tragic hero man's psyche thematic elements psychopathic suffering and failure*

المخلص

استمر ويليام شكسبير في أن يحظى باحترام وإعجاب على الرغم من مرور السنين لعدد كبير من الأسباب. إنه أحد أعظم المسرحيين الذين عرفهم العالم على الإطلاق أن مسرحياته استمرت في العرض في المسارح الشهيرة في العالم على الرغم من أن الموضوعات التي صوروها كانت ذات صلة قوية قبل خمسمائة عام. كان فهمه التام للطبيعة البشرية ونفسية الإنسان أحد العوامل وراء نجاحه. كان قادرًا على التعامل مع بعض الصفات العالمية المحددة للشخصية التي طبقها بمهارة على شخصياته التي ظلت مشهورة عبر القرون. في هذه الأطروحة التي تهدف إلى التعامل مع العناصر الموضوعية للقتل، تمكنت الباحثة من التحقيق في مسرحية معينة (ماكبيث) مع إشارة محددة إلى دور المرأة في إحداث مصائب الأفراد المتورطين. الهدف النهائي هو معرفة كيف تمكن شكسبير من بناء موضوع القتل. ساعدت الإشارة المتكررة إلى العناصر الخارقة في دفع موضوعاته إلى الغاية المقصودة دون التشكيك في قيمة هذه العناصر الشبحية. تم التطرق إلى نظرية فرويد في التحليل النفسي كما كان لا مفر منه في مثل هذا النوع من المشاريع. تم العثور على النظرية لتكون أكثر قابلية للتطبيق بشكل خاص مع السيدة ماكبيث التي يتأرجح ضميرها ذهابًا وإيابًا لمنحها أكثر اللحظات إبلاّمًا في حياتها. تم تشخيص السيدة ماكبيث من قبل العديد من النقاد على أنها تطور خوفًا مرضيًا خيانة مؤامرة لها في مقتل الملك دنكان. في عطيل، يحمل كل من Iago و Othello بذور مرض عقلي ناهيك عن أن Desdemona كان هاملت اضطرابًا عقليًا نموذجيًا لدرجة أنه بدأ هو نفسه في التشكيك في قدراته. شوهدت والدته جيرتروود وهي تسافر من نهاية حب ابنها وتشفق عليه إلى نقطة متطرفة أخرى من حب كلوديوس. أُجبرت أوفيليا، التي كانت على علاقة عاطفية حقيقية مع هاملت، وتحت الإكراه على التعبير عن كراهيتها لهاملت. جميع الشخصيات المعنية لها عنصرها النفسي بما في ذلك الشبح هاملت الذي يأمر ابنه بالرحمة على والدته لأنها كانت ساذجة. الشخصيات في المسرحيات المختارة فيما يتعلق بكفاحهم في الحياة، يحاولون أحيانًا النجاح وأحيانًا تكون حياتهم مليئة بالألم والمعاناة والفشل، مرددًا صدى الحياة الحقيقية. هذا هو الذي أدى إلى إطالة أعمال شكسبير بشكل كبير.

Shakespeare and Freudian Theory

Freud said about Shakespeare that he had a "blunter intention" than presenting the genteel, sweet prince of 19th-century tradition, imbuing his character with virility and lust. Freud suggested that an unconscious oedipal conflict caused Hamlet's hesitations. Freud proposes that Hamlet is unable to make up his mind to kill Claudius owing to his own Oedipus Complex the repressed but continuing presence in the adult's unconscious, of the male infant's desire to possess his mother and do away with his rival, the father. When the play opens, one finds an unhappy Macbeth, middle-aged, childless, and loveless without any interest outside of war. Freud argued that the lack of children increased his sense of isolation and his lack of compassion (Davis p 214). He, like his wife, is trying to fill the void in his life by any means necessary.

Freud wrote several important essays on literature, which he used to explore the psyche of authors and characters, to explain narrative mysteries, and to develop new concepts in psychoanalysis (for instance, Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva and his influential readings of the Oedipus myth and Shakespeare's Hamlet ...

Most significantly, Shakespeare's plays are part of the raw material from which Freud constructed psychoanalysis. Themes, images, plots, and lines from the plays are woven throughout the foundational texts of psychoanalysis in a way that suggests their formative influence. But along with his theories of the unconscious, and the development of therapeutic techniques, he was also notorious for controversial concepts... Freud's theory of **the Oedipus complex** was based on the belief that young children experienced an unconscious desire for their opposite-sex parent.

Freud's most famous theory was **the unconscious mind**: This is one of his most enduring ideas, which is that the mind is a reservoir of thoughts, memories, and emotions that lie outside the awareness of the conscious mind. In his play Hamlet, many issues as well as controversies arise from the text, and **one of them is feminism**. The portrayal of Shakespeare's female characters and the plots surrounding them are considered as anti-feminist due to either the role that the women play or how they were referred to within the text.

Freud regarded God as an illusion, based on the infantile need for a powerful father figure. According to him, religion, necessary to help us restrain violent impulses earlier in the development of civilization, can now be set aside in favor of reason and science.

Tragic Hero

A tragic hero is the protagonist of a tragic story or drama, in which, despite their virtuous and sympathetic traits and ambitions, they ultimately meet defeat, suffering, or even an untimely end. They are often imperfect or wounded with some sort of fraught experience, and typically have some sort of fatal flaw. Romeo Montague. In William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo Montague, the male protagonist, is an excellent example of a tragic hero. Romeo comes from noble birth and has the tragic flaw of being impulsive and having a fair share of hubris. Hamartia – It is the tragic flaw that causes downfall of a hero. Hubris – It is excessive pride and disrespect of hero for natural order. Peripeteia – The reversal of fate that the hero experiences. Anagnorisis – This moment happens when hero makes an important discovery in the story.

Gender Roles as exemplified by Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is the focus of much of the exploration of gender roles in the play. As Lady Macbeth propels her husband toward committing Duncan's murder, she indicates that she must take on masculine characteristics. Her most famous speech addresses this issue. In Act I, Scene 5, after reading Macbeth's letter in which he details the witches' prophecy and informs her of Duncan's impending visit to their castle, Lady Macbeth indicates her desire to lose her feminine qualities and gain masculine ones. She cries, "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" (I.5.38–41).

This request is part of what David Bevington, in his introduction to *Macbeth* in the fourth edition of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, sees as "sexual inversion" in the play. Clearly, gender is out of its traditional order. This

disruption of gender roles is also presented through Lady Macbeth's usurpation of the dominant role in the Macbeth's marriage; on many occasions, she rules her husband and dictates his actions.

The disruption of gender roles is also represented in the weird sisters. Their very status as witches is a violation of how women were expected to behave in Early Modern England. The trio is perceived as violating nature, and despite their designation as sisters, the gender of these characters is also ambiguous. Upon encountering them, Banquo says, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (I.2.45–47). Their facial hair symbolizes their influence in the affairs of the male dominated warrior society of Scotland. William C. Carroll, in his Bedford Cultural edition of *Macbeth*, sees the witches and the question of their gender as a device Shakespeare uses to criticize the male-dominated culture, where titles are acquired through what Carroll describes as "murderous violence."

James Stewart or Stuart (i 566-1625), the sixth king of that name to rule Scotland, believed, or claimed to believe, that he descended from one Banquo, Thane of Lochaber in the eleventh century when Scotland's king was Macbeth (see illustration 1). In late March 1603, the same King James VI became the first of that name to rule England. Barely two years later, Samuel Calvert commented on political drama, public response to it, and official failure to react:

Calvert assumes that audiences would be 'afraid' to hear or see plays representing a living monarch, secrets of state, and controversial religious matters ('King, State or Religion'), and that such plays should be treated specially and usually censored. Samuel Calvert was probably right, or at least conventional for his time. Queen Elizabeth I's first proclamation seeking to control the subject and content of drama (16May 1559) used

words that were regularly repeated and echoed in official and unofficial documents: 'her majestie doth . . . charge [her officers] . . . that they permyt none [i.e. no 'common Interludes'] to be played wherin either matters of religion or of the governaunce of the estate of the common weale shalbe handled or treated . . .', and thirty years later the Privy Council sought closer theatrical control because the companies had 'handle[d] in their plaies certen matters of Divinytie and of State unfitt to be suffred'.² To offer the public a play representing living monarchs almost always drew official attention and usually censorship. Less than eighteen months after James's accession, his newly patented London acting company, the King's Men, twice performed a now-lost play, 'the tragédie of Gowrie'. *The Tragedy of Gowrie* presumably dealt with the alleged attempt by the Earl of Gowrie and others to assassinate James on 5 August 1600, when he was still King of Scotland only.

Gowrie was quickly suppressed,¹ and its fate suggests how politically and practically difficult it was to write and perform plays concerning the Stuart monarchy and its well-known vicissitudes in Scotland and in England. Many years later, the British monarchy, now Hanoverian, faced an effort to restore the Stuarts, and after the Battle of Falkirk (1746), when Scottish troops, supported by the French, won a temporary advantage, 'The king was advised to go to the theatre and to command the tragedy of Macbeth', and the play was performed.² In the anxious times of a largely Scottish insurrection against the British (or English) central government in 1746, *Macbeth* was considered a pro-English, pro-monarchical, anti-rebel, and (curiously) anti-Stuart play.

Macbeth's reign

The historical era of Macbeth's reign was as controversial in Scottish political debate and historiography as the reigns of John or of Henry IV were

in England. In both countries, the past and its most notably disputed successions fostered, if censorship did not intervene, discussion of legitimate sovereignty, tyranny, usurpation, and deposition. Entering this simultaneously 'historical' and contemporary debate, *Macbeth* was indeed 'extremely problematic'.

Holinshed makes clear enough that the Duncan-Macbeth-Malcolm period saw Scotland begin to move from its traditional system of royal succession - tanistry - to primogeniture, the system which later became common and which was by Shakespeare's day long-established.¹ Under tanistry, a ruler's successor was elected from a parallel family line, so that, for example, nephew (and not necessarily eldest nephew) succeeded uncle.² When Duncan nominates (1.4.35-9) his eldest son, Malcolm, as his successor, he abruptly introduces a system half-way between tanistry and primogeniture. In this instance, Duncan wishes eldest son to succeed father, excluding any younger brothers (e.g. Donaldbain) or cousins, but the very nomination indicates that eldest son succeeding father (primogeniture) is not established practice.³ Henry VIII's controversial attempts to settle the royal succession made such questions vivid for an English audience, as did the recent, much-debated succession of James himself. The system in early Scotland has been described as 'circulation with elimination' where 'Tension between incumbent and successor is relieved at the expense of increased conflict between the potential successors themselves', as indeed we see in *Macbeth*.

Depiction Macbeth as Hubris

It is this that brought his downfall and ultimate death. In dramatizing Lady Macbeth's ability to challenge Macbeth's masculine identity, the play thus becomes a site of cultural production in which notions of manhood are not only validated and affirmed, but also interrogated and challenged. I will

make the argument that a patriarchal system designed to validate man's power and authority, paradoxically undermines man's autonomy and independence of thought and action.

Despite his innate desire to be king, Macbeth, for example, knows that in committing regicide, he would be going against the moral order of the universe and that all of heaven would revolt. He knows, too, that in murdering the king, he would be setting a precedent and that he in turn may suffer the same fate. He knows that in killing Duncan who is his "kin," his "guest," and his king, he will be breaking laws of hospitality, loyalty, and solidarity, fundamental to the stability of society. Yet, compelled to authenticate his masculine virtue, Macbeth capitulates to Lady Macbeth's desires. Through this one act, his life changes irrevocably and forever.

In dramatizing Macbeth's rejection of communal bonds, Shakespeare underscores the importance of male friendships. Masculinity is not only achieved through the female/male relationship, it is also constituted and asserted through male friendships. According to Bruce Smith, friendship is an important component to understanding manhood in the early modern period. He states: "For Aristotle, and for his successors, Cicero, Montaigne, and Bacon, friendship between men who are social equals constitutes the most important human bond there is."¹ Friendship thus becomes an avenue through which manhood was achieved and affirmed. Smith argues, moreover, that "friendship also seems to be the bond that holds communities together, and lawgivers seem to attach more importance to it than justice." Smith goes on to state that "Concord is the aim of lawmaking, and where friendship exists, there is already concord."³ Macbeth, however, rejects the notion of community or communal life. He exists for himself, and by himself. Like the witches, he remains outside of society, isolated, and alone.

In Act 1, Scene 7, for example, Macbeth stands outside, alone, in the dark, contemplating the murder of his king, his "kin" and his "guest," while inside people are feasting and drinking. The hospitality that Macbeth extends to the king is supposed to guarantee and ensure his safety. Yet, this intimate social and family gathering ends in a treacherous act of betrayal and murder. This one scene reveals the deep complexities of Macbeth's character, which contributes to his alienation and isolation from the rest of his community.

Similar sentiments are dramatized in Act 3, Scene 4. The appearance of Banquo's ghost triggers Macbeth's fear and guilt which disrupts the banquet, and his guests are asked to leave. Macbeth thus destroys the capacity of men to have a meal in safety and in peace. This notion is reinforced by the witches' parody of the symbolism of the shared meal in Act 4, Scene 1, in which they throw into their caldron frogs, pieces of liver, noses, lips, and aborted fetuses. Shakespeare's parody of the shared meal further underscores the importance of communal feasting in which bonds of friendship, trust, loyalty, and solidarity are formed. In dramatizing Macbeth's perversion of human relations fundamental to the stability of society, Shakespeare explores how these bonds are disrupted and destroyed by the notion of individualism and rationalism in which the individual is governed by his own ethical standards.

Codes of behavior as counterproductive of disempowerment:

Chivalric codes of behavior not only become a source of disempowerment for Macbeth, they also are a means whereby the masculinity of all men is measured and determined. In making Banquo the source of their misery and suffering, Macbeth suborns the murderers to kill Banquo by impugning their masculinity. He suggests that rather than defend themselves against those who oppress them, the murderers are weak and effeminate who suffer injustice in silence and fortitude by praying for those who destroy them, "Are you so gosselled, / To pray for this good man, and for his issue" (87–

88). Macbeth further repudiates the murderers' masculine identity by making an analogous distinction between dogs. He suggests the murderers are essentially an inferior specimen of the male species because, unlike real men, they lack an innate killer instinct. Macbeth thus taunts the murderers as Lady Macbeth taunts him. The murderers are therefore forced to kill Banquo in order to reaffirm their masculine identity. Shakespeare reveals that heroic values are not only exploited by women, they become an avenue whereby men exploit each other.

Chivalric codes of honor become the impetus whereby paternal authority denies young men their identity, volition and autonomy. In willingly sacrificing their sons in defense of personal honor and family name, the nobility lends legitimacy to, and provides justification for, the destruction of its sons. For example, the older Siward's indifference and callousness towards the death of his young son—"Had he his hurts before?" (5.7. 88) reveal how heroic values eclipse the intrinsic and fundamental human values of the individual. His father is not interested in the nature of his son's death, or in the manner in which he died, but rather as to whether his son had stood and fought like a man. The older Siward feels no sense of loss or waste. He has no feelings of regret that having died, his son's dreams and hopes have died with him. Instead, he rejoices that having died fighting like a man, his son has fulfilled his destiny on earth. Thomas More in *Utopia* satirizes chivalric codes of honor by having the Utopians describe honor as "nothing so much as glorie, as glory gotten in war."⁵ More's irony is meant to demean heroic notions of valor to suggest that like the thousands of young men who have died in battle, there is no "glorie" in war, except loss, suffering and devastation. He implies, therefore, that patriarchy's desire to aggrandize itself from the death and suffering of its sons is, in and of itself, a violation of their intrinsic humanity.

Conclusion:

Psychoanalysis as a tool of analysis and investigation is not always enough to account for the embedded aspects of the thematic and dramatic work. Freudian drive, for instance, is often attacked for giving every form of human behavior a psychosexual explanation. In reference to such criticisms, Brian Vickers assesses psychoanalysis as a critical tool and observes the following points: (1) Freud only saw as it may please him (2) there is an absence of constraints on the production of evidence; (3) if a critical method produces so many repetitive and reductive readings, then it declares its own deficiencies.

REFERENCES

- Ackermann, Z. (2011), "Performing Oblivion / Enacting Remembrance: *The Merchant of Venice* in West Germany, 1945 to 1961," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62(3),364-395.
- Adams, H. (1971), *Critical Theory since Plato*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Aristotle (330 B.C.), "Poetics," in H. Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory since Plato*, 47-66
- Bloom, H. (1991), "Interview with Harold Bloom," *The Paris Review*, spring issue. Retrieved January 12, 2012, from <http://www.mrbauld.com/bloomshk.html/>
- Enoch, D. (1991), *The Uncommon Psychiatric Syndromes*, 3rd Ed, Oxford, Butterworth-Heineman.
- Freud, S. (1985 [1887-1904]), *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Freud, S. (1953-1974 [1893-1938]), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, 24 vols, London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1900), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE, Vols. 4/5.
- Freud, S. (1905or1906), "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage," SE, Vol. 7, 305-310.
- Freud, S. (1913), "The Theme of the Three Caskets," SE, Vol. 12, 291-301.
- Freud, S. (1916), "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," SE, Vol.14, 309-334.
- Freud, S. (1924), "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," SE, Vol. 19, 173-183.
- Freud, S. (1989), *The Freud Reader*, New York: Norton.
- Gay, P. (1998), *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, New York: Norton.
- Holland, N. (1960), "Freud on Shakespeare," PMLA, 75(3), 163-173.
- Holland, N. (1984), "Freud, Physics, and Literature," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 12(3), 301-320.

Horney, K. (1950), *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle toward Self-Realization*, New York: Norton.

Jacobson, E. (1959). "The 'Exceptions'--An Elaboration of Freud's Character Study," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 14,135-153.

Jones, E. (1976 [1949]), *Hamlet and Oedipus*, New York: Norton.

Jones, E. (1953-1957), *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 3 vols, New York: Basic Freud on Shakespeare: An Approach to Psychopathic Characters . 55 . Books.

Paris, B. (1991), *Bargains with Fate: Psychological Crises and Conflicts in Shakespeare and His Plays*, New York: Plenum Press.

Philips, A. (2011), "Othello on Satisfaction," *Raritan*, 31(1), 50-69.

Rosenberg, M. (1961), *The Masks of Othello*, Berkely: University of California Press

Shakespeare, W. (1958), *Othello*, London: Methuen.

Shakespeare, W. (1962), *Macbeth*, London: Methuen.

Shakespeare, W. (1972), *King Lear*, London: Methuen.

Shakespeare, W. (1982), *Hamlet*, London: Methuen.

Shakespeare, W. (1985), *The Merchant of Venice*, London: Methuen.

Shakespeare, W. (1997), *The Riverside Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd Edition,

Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Todd, J. and K. Dewhurst, (1955), "The Othello Syndrome: A Study in the Psychopathology of Sexual Jealousy," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorder*,122(4), 367-374.

Vickers, B. (1993), *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*, NewHaven: Yale University Press