Depiction of Shakespeare's female characters in positions of power and monarchy in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*

Ahmed Sharif Talukder[1]
Ph. D. Scholar,Department of English,School of Liberal Education(SLE),
Galgotias University, Uttar Pradesh, India.
E-mail: safatnayeem34@gmail.com

Dr. Archana Rathore[2]
Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Education (SLE),
Galgotias University, Uttar Pradesh, India.
E-mail: archana.rathore@galgotiasuniversity.edu.in

Abstract:

In the latter half of the fifteenth century, William Shakespeare began composing and performing plays. Elizabeth Tudor reigned as Queen from 1558 until her death on March 23, 1603. As a result, two of the most significant figures in English history from the 16th and 17th centuries lived together. Both of them strolled through the streets of London. At Court, they interacted with each other. The Queen was entertained by Shakespeare's company. Is it possible that such close contact between the monarch and the playwright shaped Shakespeare's writing? In several of Shakespeare's plays, female protagonists are given power. In his comedies, the female protagonists are successful in acting authoritatively. These plays, however, do not discuss the role of female monarchy. Given that one of the key societal factors of Shakespeare's day was the monarch's gender, one may expect to see these gender considerations reflected in Shakespeare's writing. Indeed, the popular and political writer cannot seem to get away from socio-economic issues. Shakespeare obliquely emphasizes the dangers of women's engagement in politics at the sovereign level in two of his plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Shakespeare dramatizes genuine political concerns that emerged from and during Elizabeth Tudor's reign through Gertrude's marriage to Hamlet's uncle, as well as Lady Macbeth's uncontrolled political ambition. Shakespeare expresses political gender fears in his characters, establishes a schema of conflict and chaos exploding from such anxiety in his themes, and fulfills the demand for restoration to state stability through solidification of the patriarchal system in the plays' contextual resolutions. Although *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* do not make an explicit political argument for Elizabeth's monarchy, Shakespeare alludes to the conflicts that existed at the time concerning female rule in both plays.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Elizabeth's monarchy; portrayal of women; *Macbeth*; *Hamlet*.

Themes of Interest

Shakespeare's writings undoubtedly reflected current events. Scholars disagree about whether his plays should be read as contemporary political writing or as universal philosophical statements. Authors Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa question the limitations of understanding Shakespeare in historical terms in their book *Shakespeare's Politics*. "The poet is an imitator of nature; he reproduces what he sees in the world, and it is only his preoccupation with that world that renders him a poet," they admit (1996, p.8). The dramatist must reconstruct current social and political concerns as well as universal themes in order to recreate the world. Other experts argue that the importance of historical depiction cannot be overstated. Shakespeare was a Renaissance individual

and writer, and his writing cannot be divorced from this perspective. According to Leonard Tennenhouse (1986), author of *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*:

Where the literary figure is presumed to have written truths that obtain over time and across cultures, the man Shakespeare is situated in a Renaissance context. His writing is largely topical and allegorical as he comments on the figures and policies of his time in relation to which, then, one can fix his political identity… Shakespeare becomes a means of turning the canonized Shakespeare into a window onto Renaissance social relations, a mirror of his times, a text that presupposes a context "outside" of itself (p.1).

Shakespeare's writing, according to Tennenhouse, reveals the essence of the Renaissance world as well as particular characters in the plays. Scholars believe that Shakespeare's writings provide an opportunity to explore cultural attitudes during and immediately after Elizabeth's reign, regardless of the position from which they suggest Shakespeare should be examined. Shakespeare provides a glimpse into the nature of Elizabethan society.

Shakespeare's writing not only captures some of the cultural currents of the time, but it also has a definite political leaning. Shakespeare's subject matter and themes frequently revolve on power and politics. "Shakespeare is from first to last an intensely political writer," writes John Wain (1994), author of *The Living World of Shakespeare*. He understands that "the common man's satisfaction is inextricably linked to the question of who holds power at the top" (p.23).

"The English scene, viewed from an Elizabethan standpoint, was dominated by one urgent necessity: the need for political stability, guaranteed by an undisputed monarchy," Wain writes of Shakespeare's thematic goals, concluding that the stability of the sovereignty was most important (Ibid., 24). The Tudor monarchy's instability, plagued by issues such as Henry's succession, Mary's failed marriage, and Elizabeth's reluctance about marriage, had sparked a need in the culture for a stable king. Female rule was inherently dangerous because it lacked stability.

This threat caused an indeterminate level of fear among the English people, who questioned if Elizabeth was a suitable ruler. Her gender, in some ways, suggested that she wasn't. An Elizabethan historian, Carole Levin (1994), explains the difficulty of Elizabeth's womanhood for the normal English subject:

Many of the English reacted with ambivalence to the idea of a woman ruler. The ambivalence centered directly on the conflict between her rule and her femininity. If a queen were confidently to demonstrate the attributes of power, she would not be acting in a womanly manner; yet womanly behavior would ill-fit a queen for the rigors of rule (p.3).

Many questions arose as a result of a female monarchy. Is it possible for a feminine monarch to lead the state through a war? Is it possible for a queen to rule over masculine subjects? Is it possible for a queen to give birth to an heir without handing up power to her spouse and maybe his family? Was a woman qualified to lead the huge English country on a fundamental level of gender relations? Or did the state debase itself as a result of her gender's inadequacy? Many Elizabethan Englishmen, including Stratford's own William Shakespeare, struggled with these issues. Finally, the culture yearned for the stability represented by a king, not a queen, as a result of the worries engendered by these issues.

The themes of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* both reflect this longing for stability. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is persuaded and assisted by a bizarre and unreal suggestion of future reign to persuade

and assist her husband to commit treason by killing the king and taking an offered crown. The play *Hamlet* depicts the assassination of a monarch by his brother and his subsequent marriage to Queen Gertrude. As a result of this wedding, Hamlet, the King's son, and Claudius, the Queen's new spouse, there is a disagreement for control of the throne. In both of these plays, women's actions cause political instability and natural equilibrium to be disrupted as a result of their participation in political processes. Despite the fact that neither play is a direct critique of Elizabeth, they both deal with the social fears that have arisen as a result of decades of female monarchy. The plays' connections to the Renaissance world, particularly the concerns about Elizabeth Tudor's leadership, are shown through analysis of the plays.

Lady Macbeth's political disturbance is caused by her ambition, which is made all the more hazardous by her femininity. When she reads Macbeth's revelation of the witches' prophecies, she assumes that only her tenacity would push Macbeth to aggressively pursue and obtain the desired royal position of power and control. With reproached words, she summons Macbeth, who is nowhere to be found:

Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear

And chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round, (Macbeth, I.v.25-28.)

Lady Macbeth professes to be capable of manipulating Macbeth's character to suit her needs and objectives. "At the outset of Macbeth, Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth the very same elements which other Jacobean playwrights use to display the absolute power of the state," Tennenhouse says of her depiction in political terms. He demonstrates how subversively these could be used (p.128). Lady Macbeth's remarks are unquestionably provocative in that she convinces her husband to assassinate the rightful, current monarch in their midst. With this ruse, she gains complete state power by acting as if she is unaccountable to anyone and hence deserving of no criticism. Lady Macbeth, as a result, is a negative image of female ambition and power in the Renaissance period.

When considering Lady Macbeth's portrayal, it's important to realize that female cravings for power were regarded as abnormal. In fact, Shakespeare uses patronizing language to emphasize the seriousness of these urges. Lady Macbeth sacrifices her femininity in the name of power:

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! (Macbeth, I.v.40-43)

Lady Macbeth's wish to be "unsexed" reveals the implied conflict between feminine nature and political ambition. Lady Macbeth emphasizes the unnaturalness of these urges by expressing them

in male or gender-neutral terms. Shakespeare's language invites conflict and reflects the political gender divisions that already existed in Elizabethan society. "For a woman, the demands made on the occupant of the throne were supremely difficult to meet, since the characteristic qualities which a monarch was expected to display were largely masculine," writes Wallace MacCaffrey (1993) in his biography of Elizabeth I. (p. 358). While Lady Macbeth wishes to be "unsexed," Elizabeth used the title King as much as she used the title Queen, attempting to demonstrate her own power by overcoming the gender barrier. Even Elizabeth couldn't escape her femininity, as Levin (2013) points out: "Elizabeth might incorporate both male and female in her sovereignty, but her body was a very human female one, and hence to both Elizabeth herself and her people, an imperfect one" (p.147).

Shakespeare defeminizes Lady Macbeth to give her goals credibility, just as Elizabeth struggled to assert governmental authority as a woman and assumed male gender characteristics. The play was tense because of the uncomfortable placement, which reflected the Elizabethan world's worry. Lady Macbeth's peculiarity is pushed to the point that Shakespeare reverses the Macbeths' gender norms. Macbeth, on the other hand, is far less determined than his wife. As a result, Lady Macbeth scorns him because of his frailty. She chastises her husband for bloodying her hands in the king's death:

"My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (Macbeth, II.ii.63-64).

Typically, women are linked with frailty, whereas men achieve integrity through strength and bravery in battle. But, at the decisive time, Macbeth loses his courage, and Lady Macbeth assumes his bloody responsibility. Lady Macbeth sees her husband's vulnerability as not just disgraceful, but also as unnatural as her power. A social reversal of this magnitude has far-reaching implications. Tennenhouse makes the following observation on the role reversal and its political significance:

Most other Jacobean tragedies presuppose this same connection between sexual relations and the condition of the political body. In staging *Macbeth*, Shakespeare simply literalizes the homology which makes unruliness on the part of an aristocratic woman into an assault on the sovereign's power. He allows Lady Macbeth to overrule her husband in order to show that such inversion of sexual relations is also an inversion of the political order. Her possession of illicit desire in its most masculine form — the twisted ambition of the malcontent — leads directly to regicide (p.131).

Establishing a woman above a man has political as well as domestic ramifications. Lady Macbeth's influence over Macbeth represents a greater question of female participation in the political structure and a woman's possible domination over a man as a subject.

Lady Macbeth's power, despite everything, resonates with the befuddled Elizabethan world. Due to the long heritage of female authority from Mary to Elizabeth, Tennenhouse claims that the Elizabethan era was an "age which thought of state power as female" (Ibid., p. 24). The English people were ruled by women for a period. At the same time, a cultural desire for state power in the hands of women does not always coincide with an inclination to think of state power as female.

While the Elizabethan world accepted the reign of a queen, a return to political stability in the shape of a male monarch was always the expected end. As it pertains to Macbeth, Tennenhouse says:

The same homology between kinship and kingship accounts for the curious means Shakespeare uses in the play to restore the world to its natural hierarchy. Perhaps most obvious among these is the gendering of patriarchal prerogatives. If Macbeth's assault on genealogy began with his wife's possession of certain male features associated with political ambition, then the play creates a clear distinction between male and female in restoring the proper dissymmetry of monarch and subject (Ibid., 131).

Lady Macbeth's strength deteriorates as she has fits of insanity and sleepwalking. In a domineering role, the female cannot live. "No one can call our power to account," Lady Macbeth asserts (Macbeth, V.i.37), yet she appears to misunderstand the force of her own conscience. Her obsessive preoccupation on bloodied hands, as well as her last act of suicide, suggests a personal trial and conviction. Lady Macbeth's death, ironically, relieves tension by signaling the final nail in the coffin, which correlates to a return to the status quo in the political framework. This thematic link is still relevant in today's culture. The Elizabethan English also expected and desired the return of masculine dominance:

However effective a ruler Elizabeth in particular might be, the fact that she was a woman was insurmountable. There never was a tradition envisioning a savior queen. The pattern of the male monarch as savior echoes through sixteenth-century England, so that the fears caused by female rule manifested themselves in a longing for the safety and tradition of the king (Levin, 1993. p. 120).

Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth's tragic fall from power illustrates this cultural expectation.While Macbeth depicts the unnatural and uncertain features of feminine political power and gender, Hamlet by Shakespeare examines questions of dominance and sexuality. Because the queen's body contains both sovereignty and virtue, sexual acts have a major implication for the female supreme ruler. As a result, Hamlet mirrors the Elizabethan world's gender and sexuality issues.

The connection between the natural body of the monarch and the metaphorical sovereignty of the state embodied inside the monarch must be considered while considering the sexuality of the Tudor queens. The royalty's relational behavior was determined and limited by this link. A biographer, Susan Frye (1993), elaborates on this cultural understanding throughout Elizabeth's reign:

"Because questions of marriage and the succession connected her natural and political bodies in ways that Elizabeth constantly sought to control, the queen herself became the most politically significant sign of her reign" (p.24).

As a result, the queen's physical body gained importance. However, the Elizabethan culture was concerned about the weakness of the symbolic component of sovereignty within this expanded natural body.

Because of the importance of this dominion, both in terms of its name and in terms of its physical ramifications, the marriage of a female ruler created tremendous worry. Mary's marriage to Philip II of Spain had been disastrous before Elizabeth's reign. Philip was not welcomed in England as a foreign monarch, and many thought that he ruled Mary both domestically and politically. According to John Ernest Neale (1974), an early twentieth century scholar, "Elizabeth was prejudiced by the knowledge that Mary's major blunder had been her marriage" (p.80). Elizabeth's refusal to marry could have been motivated by a wish to avoid English hostility toward a shared monarch. Her dating strategy and toying with proposals just skirted the question of marriage. Nonetheless, Elizabeth's capacity to marry caused ongoing concern in Elizabethan society. If

Elizabeth marries, her husband might become the monarch. Foreign rule could come to England if Elizabeth marries a non-Englishman. If Elizabeth marries an Englishman, a new royal family may emerge. Given these reservations, no man could possibly be Elizabeth's perfect husband. As a result, she took on the responsibility of sovereignty on her own. Elizabeth, unlike Mary, did not choose a monarch for England.

Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, chose a new king for Denmark. Shakespeare elucidates the ramifications of this decision. Gertrude grants Claudius access to the symbolic seat of the sovereignty by marrying him. Tennenhouse captures Gertrude's natural body's thematic centrality:

"The dilemma of the play therefore arises from and turns upon the meaning and disposition of Gertrude's body" (p. 112). He further comments that "the fate of Gertrude makes Hamlet an Elizabethan play. Upon the condition of her body depends the health of the state" (Ibid., p.114).

Claudius' availability to Gertrude's body, like Lady Macbeth's wishes, causes chaos in the state. Gertrude and Denmark's fates are defined not only by Gertrude's resume of sexual activity, but also by her dreadful marriage choice. While Gertrude's decision to marry her brother-in-law has no bearing on the decisions of either Tudor queen, the play does reflect the difficulties surrounding Mary's marriage to Philip and Elizabeth's ability to marry. Claudius himself describes his rise to power as a result of his marriage:

"Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,

Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state,

Have we – … Taken to wife" (Hamlet. I.ii.8-10, 14).

He makes himself the new king by marrying the queen. Claudius, on the other hand, had to murder his brother in order to accomplish this. He does not have a moral claim to the throne. Furthermore, Claudius' marriage to the Queen deprives Hamlet of some of his sovereign status and creates ambiguity about the legitimate ruler of the state. Similarly, Hamlet describes Claudius in words that imply a mistrust of males who gain power by marriage to a queen:

"My father's brother, but no more like my father I Than I to Hercules" (Ibid., I.ii.152-53).

Claudius is described by Hamlet as a ruthless usurper of power by sexual manipulation:

A murderer and a villain;

A slave that is not the twentieth part the tithe

Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;

A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,

That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,

And put it in his pocket! (Hamlet. III.iv.97-102).

The English loathing of Mary's Philip and the suspicions surrounding suitors for Elizabeth are reflected in such a despicable and larcenous portrayal of the monarch's spouse. Claudius and his mother Gertrude are both affected by Hamlet's harsh remarks. Because of her unlawful sexual behavior and marriage, he accuses his mother of corruption. Despite the fact that Claudius and Gertrude had a matrimonial relationship, Hamlet was angry by the hasty and incestuous features of their marriage. Claudius refers to Gertrude as his "sometime sister, now our queen" because the couple married less than a month after Hamlet's father died (Ibid., I.ii.8-9). As a result, Hamlet lashes out at his mother, warning that "rank corruption, mining everything within, / Infects unseen" (Hamlet. III.iv,139-40). Gertrude's sexual relations, in Hamlet's opinion, corrupt her character.

Hamlet's point of view reflects the moral standards of the day. The Elizabethan world was concerned about both power and purity as a result of royal sexual behavior. Because women were unable to fight on the battlefield, chastity was the most important indicator of their honor and purity. "For a woman, her only source of honor is her sexual credit," writes Levin (2013) (p.68). As a result, Hamlet's accusations of impurity cast doubt on Gertrude's virtue. Elizabeth's sexual behavior predictably garnered widespread scrutiny. The Queen took advantage of society's association of female honor and chastity in great part. She declared her virginity in public, even embracing the title "Virgin Queen." This picture linked the ideals of sexual purity with royal sovereignty attributes, reinforcing her rule's legitimacy and moral power.

However, Elizabeth's image as the "Virgin Queen" was not without its detractors. The English, according to Levin, were "free to speculate about her lovers and supposed bastards" (Ibid., p.77). These implicit accusations posed a serious danger to Elizabeth's position. "In accusing the queen of sexual improprieties, people were charging her with dishonorable behavior in a way that would not be the case in a similar rumor about a king," Levin argues (Ibid., p.78). Some of this supposition took on a subversive political meaning. Cardinal William Allen claimed in a 1588 treatise titled *Admonition to the Nobility and People of England and Ireland* that Elizabeth failed to marry "because she cannot confine herself to one man," and that this resulted in "the whole world deriding our effeminate dastardie, that have suffered such creature almost thirty years together to raigne both over our bodies and soules" (Ibid., p.81). By inference, the Cardinal says that the English should not accept their queen. Despite its religious connotations, this and other accusations of "whorish" behavior posed a threat to the queen's personality and sovereignty. The throne was not suited for an impure maiden queen.

Some of the conjecture was prompted by Elizabeth's royal declarations of celibacy, but the criticisms also reflect an innate distrust of women. Shakespeare, too, catches this cultural apprehension. Hamlet's charge against his mother is based on a broad condemnation of female sex: "Frailty, thy name is woman" (Hamlet.I.ii,46). His specific disapproval of Gertrude's sexual activity reflects the pervasive and oppressive belief that women are the weaker sex. Women's honesty was based on their chastity, yet their gender left them vulnerable to corruption claims. Women were considered weak and untrustworthy in Elizabethan times. The worries that accompanied Elizabeth's reign are characterized by such a societal mindset.

Many of Shakespeare's themes are based on historical events from his period. Subtle details in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* clearly show the Elizabethan need for a stable and permanent male monarch. Shakespeare depicts anarchy and unrest that is fueled in part by feminine ambition or exploitation. Shakespeare's thematic concentration is couched in terms of reality portrayals and ideal visions. According to Alexander Leggatt (2002), "He is concerned both with things as they are and with things as they ought to be, and his depiction of public life includes clear appraisals of the one and

powerful images of the other" (p.47). This statement is directly applicable to Hamlet's and Macbeth's gender worries. Female monarchs appear in both plays, and female power is harmed. However, Shakespeare's portrayal argues that such sovereignty and the resulting agony should not exist. The cultural context in which Elizabeth fought is described by such a society attitude. According to Frye (2002), Elizabeth's position as a Renaissance ruler was as follows:

By declaring herself a woman while acting outside of defined female roles, politicizing the language of virginity, and establishing herself as the mediator among those special-interest groups who sought to define her within the parameters of their needs, Elizabeth challenges the elitist patriarchal sign system that presents gender identity as natural and immutable (p.6).

Nevertheless, the fear expressed in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* shows that women, including Elizabeth, are unable to acceptably defeat patriarchy.

Concluding Remarks:

The status of women in positions of power is not what it "ought to be." The status of women in positions of power is not what it "ought to be." Shakespeare speaks in favor of patriarchal systems in attempt to reestablish unity. In none of his plays evil power is allowed to become triumphant in the end. For instance, Claudius is doomed and Fortinbras is restored to the throne. Malcolm is also restored as rightful king and Macbeth is overthrown. Shakespeare's conclusions do not advocate for women's active participation in the political system. In fact, the decision coincides with women's exclusion from politics. Shakespeare's drama mirrors the Elizabethan world in this way. Potential conflicts arise from feminine aspiration for sovereign power and corruption of the political body through corruption of the female sovereign body in the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In both plays, Shakespeare reflects the Elizabethan culture's worry about the presence of and reliance on a queen. In addition, both plays conclude with the loss of female sovereign authority and an apparent return to the status quo within a patriarchal paradigm. Shakespeare's political resolution and Elizabethan cultural ambition are represented by this return to patriarchy.

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