

## DIVERGING REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES AND TRAGEDIES

### SHAKESPEARE'İN KOMEDİLERİ VE TRAJEDİLERİNDEKİ KADINLARIN ÇEŞİTLENEN TEMSİLLERİ

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#### ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare dealt with female gender roles from very different perspectives in his tragedies and comedies. While he generally evaluated gender roles from a traditional point of view in his tragedies, he examined them in subversive and critical ways in his comedies. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how Shakespeare's comedies challenge traditional gender stereotypes, while his tragedies tend to reinforce them. In Shakespeare's tragedies, there is a tendency to bring traditional feminine gender stereotypes to light while his comedies criticize or make fun of them. Taking them seriously or lightly is the main element that makes a play a tragedy or a comedy since they are directly influential in the development of plot in the play. In Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet, the roles of women are reflected in line with the traditional mentality and they are defined in a clear and consistent manner. On the other hand, in Twelfth Night, As You Like It and Love's Labour's Lost, feminine roles are concealed or made ambiguous.

**Key Words:** Shakespeare, comedies, tragedies, women, gender roles

#### ÖZET

William Shakespeare, trajedilerinde ve komedilerinde kadın cinsiyet rollerini farklı açılardan ele almıştır. Trajedilerinde genellikle toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini geleneksel bir bakış açısıyla değerlendirirken, komedilerinde, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini yıkıcı ve eleştirel yollardan incelemiştir. Bu nedenle, bu makalenin amacı, Shakespeare'in komedilerinin geleneksel cinsiyet klişelerine meydan okurken, trajedilerinin onları nasıl pekiştirme eğiliminde olduğunu göstermektir. Shakespeare'in komedileri, geleneksel cinsiyet rollerini eleştirirken ya da onlarla dalga geçerken, Shakespeare'in trajedilerinde geleneksel cinsiyet klişelerini gün ışığına çıkarma eğilimi vardır. Onları ciddiye almak ya da hafife almak, bir oyunu trajedi ya da komedi yapan ana unsurdur, çünkü bunlar oyundaki olay örgüsünün gelişiminde doğrudan etkilidirler. Othello, Macbeth ve Hamlet'te kadının rolleri, geleneksel zihniyete göre yansıtılır ve belirli çizgilerle keskin bir şekilde tanımlanır. Öte yandan, On İkinci Gece, Size Nasıl Geliyorsa, ve Aşkın Çabası Boşuna'da kadınsı roller gizlenir veya belirsiz hale getirilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Shakespeare, komediler, trajediler, kadınlar, cinsiyet rolleri

Gender roles, biases, and stereotypes that have been big obstacles particularly to women throughout history are prevalent in almost every sphere of life and have been defining influences in societies both sociologically and psychologically. Most writers have tried to reflect the societal attitudes about gender roles in their works. Related to the Shakespearean period, it is clearly seen that Shakespeare, who was a great genius and playwright, dealt with the roles of men and women of his century in his tragedies and comedies from different perspectives. Feminist criticism of Shakespearean tragedies condemn patriarchy based on their particular conception of masculinity. "The period was fraught with anxiety about rebellious women and particularly their rebellion through language" (Newman 1991: 40) and "an obsessive energy was invested in exerting control over the unruly woman—the woman who was exercising either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man" (Boose 1991: 195). In *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Juliet Dusinberre argues that Renaissance feminism has a major influence on Shakespeare's work (Dusinberre, 1975). In "O my most sacred lady': Female Metaphor in *The Winter's Tale*," Patricia Gourlay draws our attention to the "triumph of female values over the masculine social order" (Gourlay 1975: 378) in *The Winter's Tale*. In "*The Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage", Coppelia Kahn analyses *The Taming of the Shrew* and comments on it as an ironic statement on patriarchal conventions of marriage (Kahn 1975: 88-102). While Shakespeare generally evaluated gender roles from a traditional point of view in his tragedies, he examined them in subversive and critical ways in his comedies. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how Shakespeare's comedies challenge traditional gender stereotypes, while his tragedies tend to reinforce them. Furthermore, by focusing on gender relations, marriage and family structures, and courtship customs, this paper will compare Shakespeare's comedies with his tragedies through feminist theory.

In her book *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Linda Bamber asserts: “only some plays can be grouped to illustrate a progression toward the feminist desiderata, however we define the desiderata themselves. Only some plays, or some portions of some plays, can satisfy our desire as feminists to share common ground with this great writer” (Bamber 1982: 2). There are two remarkable features of women taken for granted in the traditional mindset. One of them is the traditional biblical belief that all evil starts with women. Women are associated with evil. The second one is that women are accepted as weak and fragile creatures both emotionally and physically, in contrast to men. For instance, in *Macbeth*, one of Shakespeare’s tragedies, the woman character, Lady Macbeth is totally evil and ruthless. She is a strong woman, while she is a dark and scheming character. She always provokes Macbeth and persuades him to kill the king. We meet a monstrous, horrible image of woman by means of Lady Macbeth. She uses words so skilfully that Macbeth feels he has to kill the King. In line 39, Lady Macbeth says: “unsex me here.” This expression is very important. She means, “make me unlike a woman”. She tells spirits “come to my woman’s breasts and take my milk for gall” (Act I, Scene V, ll.45, 46). She wants to be filled with “direst cruelty” (Act I, Scene V, ll.41). She even wants to provoke Macbeth to evil, since he is not bad enough. When she sees Macbeth is unwilling, undecided or coward for the murder, she insults his masculinity and says:

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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
 and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
 Have done to this (Act I, Scene VII, ll.54-9).

These words show the extent of the cruelty and determination that Lady Macbeth would exhibit if she were in the place of her husband. She is also depicted as very cunning and manipulative. She tempts her husband to murder, saying that he should be bold since he is a man and calling him cowardly and indecisive. It is conceivable that without her pressure he would never commit that murder. Thus, we see that Lady Macbeth is exactly representative of evil. She is so bold and fearless that she wants to be like a man, since women are generally perceived as weak. She takes control of the situation and dominates Macbeth. Granting the type of woman Lady Macbeth represents, it is very clear that there is an emphasis on the view that women who show ambition and express themselves independently are evil and even unnatural, as Lady Macbeth wants any kind of elements of compassion or pity to be taken away from herself and her breast milk exchanged for gall. Therefore, the traditional woman stereotype is seen to be empowered in the play *Macbeth*.

Mainly depicted as a patriarchal society in the 16th and early 17th century, Elizabethan England provided women with fewer rights and less freedom in society, as women were regarded as inferior to their male counterparts because of their lack of proper education. “Woman’s place was within doors, her business domestic ... Women ... themselves accepted this divorce between the private (feminine) and public (masculine) sphere and, despite the recent precedents of Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth, they shared the age’s distaste [...] for the notion of women’s involvement in politics” (Gajowski 2009: 53). Women were generally in a secondary position compared with men. They were thought to be more emotional than men and were associated with sexuality rather than their reason. Their power was thought to lie in their charm and beauty. It was believed that they employed their sexuality to seduce men as temptresses. For instance, in *Hamlet*, in one of Hamlet’s soliloquies, women are identified with fickle and under the sway of changing emotions. Hamlet is angry with his mother since she gets married with his uncle soon after his father’s death. He resents this situation and scorns her mother saying:

Frailty, thy name is woman.  
 A little month, or ere those shoes were old,  
 With which she followed my poor father’s body  
 Like Niobe, all tears why she, even she,  
 (O Heaven! A beast that wants discourse of reason  
 Would have mourn’d longer) married with mine uncle... (Act I, Scene 2, p.36)

It is clear that women are put in a lower position even than animals in these lines. At this point, there is a contemptuous picture of women. Besides, in one of Hamlet's speeches with Ophelia, there are many insulting words for women. For instance, Hamlet says: "if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough, what monsters you make of them" (Act 3, Scene I, pp. 83). Here women are reflected as sinister, stealthy, manipulative and unreliable, driven by an uncontrolled sexuality that makes them betray their husbands. Hamlet also criticizes women severely in this way: "I have heard of your paintings, your wantonness, your ignorance" (Act 3, Scene I, pp. 83-84). All these words are references to women's seductive aspect and their status as deceivers, fooling men through their beautiful and false appearances. Hamlet also does not believe in women's love and he compares it to a prologue in terms of its shortness.

Hamlet: Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?

Ophelia: 'Tis brief, my Lord.

Hamlet: As woman's love (Act 3, Scene 2, pp.91).

Rachkin expresses: "plays with overtly repressive and misogynist themes have proved increasingly popular, and the stories they tell are held up as historically accurate expressions of beliefs generally endorsed in Shakespeare's time" (Rachkin 2005: 62). Leslie Fiedler claims that tragedies are obsessed with the dark side of women's sexuality and implies that Shakespeare's "hatred and fear of female sexuality pass over into hysteria" (Fiedler 1973: 61). It is clear that Hamlet feels a very harsh aversion to women, maybe because of her mother's conduct after his father's death. His words about women are full of hatred. Women's infidelity is also shown in this way: "so think thou wilt no second husband wed: But die thy thoughts, when thy first Lord is dead" (Act 3, Scene 2, pp. 93). These are very harsh claims about women. When Hamlet confronts his mother, he criticizes her severely and calls her insincere, shameless, unreasonable and lustful. All these features of women reflected in *Hamlet* confirms the traditional women stereotype by picturing them very dramatically and impressively.

In *Othello*, we also come across a model of woman who is entrapped in a male-dominated society. Desdemona, Othello's wife, is considered as stereotypically weak and submissive although she partly behaves independently and boldly. Despite her efforts to defend herself against the patriarchal society, she cannot avoid being its victim. In fact, Desdemona acts as a self-effacing, faithful wife; however, the traditional outlook of the society depicts her as unreliable. Valerie Traub observes that "it is by now a commonplace that Shakespeare was preoccupied with the uncontrollability of women's sexuality; witness the many plots concerning the need to prove female chastity, the threat of adultery, and, even when female fidelity is not a major theme of the play, the many references to cuckoldry in songs, jokes, and passing remarks" (Traub 1995: 121). It is very interesting that Desdemona's father, Brabantio warns Othello against the possibility of Desdemona's deceit. He explains Othello with an implication: "she has deceived her father, and may thee" (Act 1, Scene 3, line 289). In the eye of her father, Desdemona is unreliable since she elopes with Othello, which is not a suitable act for a woman in her position. In this way, she acts rebelliously and draws a manipulative and disloyal picture of women. She symbolizes the violation of faith. The common view about women treats them with suspicion (in a male-dominated society). Desdemona is also accused of betraying Othello because of Iago's fake machinations without having concrete proof. She is sentenced to death by Othello. She cannot justify or vindicate herself in this patriarchal society. She is treated unjustly. She is not given the right to defend herself. She is depicted as disloyal despite her innocence. Nonetheless, Desdemona acts submissively by claiming she is herself responsible for her death rather than accusing Othello.

Emilia: O, Who hath done this deed?

Desdem. : Nobody; I myself. Farewell;

Commend me to my kind lord: O farewell! (Act V, Scene 2, pp.125)

Desdemona has to submit to men's authority since she is helpless. She becomes a prey to the demands of patriarchal society. The situation she is exposed to is a perfect example of men's domination over women and a perfect reflection of traditional gender attitudes, while the play does not support the way she is treated as a woman. Following Desdemona's death Othello's words about her is clearly indicative of a model woman who is wronged and victimized by a patriarchal society. In Act V, Scene 2, Othello says "she turned to folly, and she was a whore" (ll.132) and "she was false as water" (ll.134). At the moment Othello is killing her, he also calls her "strumpet" (ll.80). Desdemona is not given the right to vindicate and she is condemned

to death without judgement. Although Othello realizes that she is innocent afterwards, it is too late to bring her to life again.

The traditional perspective on women does not change in a patriarchal society easily. They are always labelled as unreliable and evil. They are undervalued and punished by men. They do not have the value they deserve in society. They are slandered, accused or pictured as evil, temptress and disloyal. In these three tragedies of Shakespeare, traditional gender stereotypes are dominant and prevalent. They are significant works in terms of indicating the outlook of the society on men and women and strengthens the conventional belief about them. But in Shakespeare's comedies the case is reversed and traditional gender roles are challenged. For instance, in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare deals with the theme of disguising and this leads to the suspension of the normal rules of society as characters can adopt non-traditional roles. This leads to a more flexible approach to gender roles, as Linda Bamber notes:

The sharpest contradiction of all is between the tragedies and the comedies. In the comedies Shakespeare seems if not a feminist then at least a man who takes the woman's part. Often the women in the comedies are more brilliant than the men, more aware of themselves and their world, saner, livelier, more gay. In the tragedies, however, Shakespeare creates such nightmare female figures as Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth, and Volumnia (Bamber 1982: 2).

In *Twelfth Night*, the protagonist of the play Viola decides to disguise herself as a man with the name of Cesario and starts to work in the service of Duke Orsino. Viola's disguise becomes the main barrier to both her own love and the other characters' love in the play. The change of identity compels her to conceal her love, while she cannot respond to Lady Olivia's love as a woman. Only when she reveals herself, are all the problems solved. However, with this revelation, it is understood that at the beginning of the play not all loves have a permanent validity since the characters find different partners in the end except for Orsino and Viola. Orsino and Viola are attracted to each other even if Viola is disguised as a man and Olivia's grief for her brother prevents her from falling in love. She mentions this problem to Viola, disguised as Cesario in the following extract:

OLIVIA:     [...] I cannot love him.  
                   Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,  
                   Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth,  
                   In voices well divulged, free, learned, and valiant,  
                   And in dimension and the shape of nature  
                   A gracious person; but yet I cannot love him. (I.5 1.246-251)

However, Olivia first falls in love with Viola disguised as Cesario. When it is revealed she is a woman, Olivia easily becomes pleased with her twin brother, Cesario. As seen, gender roles are not treated with seriousness but are subject to playful manipulation by means of disguise. Through disguise people's emotions are manipulated in unexpected ways and they do not act in the way they are conventionally expected to. This shows that gender roles are suspended in the play and this is a clear challenge to traditional gender stereotypes. Women figures in Shakespeare's comedies never give up fighting for their love despite their hopeless situations.

As far as Shakespeare's interest in appealing and lively female characters is concerned, Phyllis Rachkin notes in her work *Shakespeare and Women*:

Because most of the women in Shakespeare's family outlived their brothers and husbands, the family in which he grew up was actually predominantly female. In addition to numerous sisters and female cousins, Shakespeare had eight aunts, including one who outlived her husband by forty-one years. Sixteenth-century legal records show that the women in Shakespeare's family controlled considerable property both in land and in money. They also bequeathed property, served as executors of wills, and engaged in litigation designed to defend and further their financial interests. Shakespeare's mother, for instance, although she had nine older sisters and two older brothers, inherited the only freehold property her father bequeathed and served as one of his two executors (Phyllis 2005: 33).

Rachkin makes a connection between Shakespeare's familial background and his desire for representing interesting female characters in his comedies. Although he was not aristocratic, maybe he was inspired to write comedies that could be regarded as a way of exploring the feminine world and its possibilities,

granting that he was surrounded by several women exercising a certain power because of their bequeathed property in his family. As a very innovative Elizabethan playwright, Shakespeare was successful in representing women as strong characters, as opposed to the traditional outlook on women as the weak sex in Elizabethan times.

The greater empowerment of women in the comedies is also reflected in plot outcomes. Mihoko Suzuki indicates in *Twelfth Night* all the female characters of the play manage to reach what they have desired unlike the male characters:

*Twelfth Night* allows all the female characters to obtain the object of their desires: Maria marries Toby, Viola Orsino, and perhaps most important, Olivia weds Sebastian. Olivia says to Viola disguised as Cesario, "I would you were as I would have you be" (III. ii.142); and in fact, her wish comes true in the person of Sebastian. By contrast, Orsino, despite his superior rank, does not attain Olivia, whom he courts during most of the play, and Malvolio emphatically does not rise into the ranks of the nobility through a match with Olivia. Orsino, Toby, and Sebastian will eventually function as objects of the female characters' desires (Suzuki in Callaghan 2001: 141).

In *Twelfth Night*, we come across a successful and intelligent woman profile, Viola who can prove herself only by disguising into a man. She can only play an active role as male, called Cesario in society. Another intelligent woman in the comedy is Olivia; nevertheless, she is a traditional woman type who submits to patriarchy and lives in accordance with the norms of that society by just controlling her house and does nothing in the public sphere. Maria is presented as something of a schemer in her plan against Malvolio, but again is not punished for this and shows considerable wit and intelligence in her plotting.

Male characters in contrast are shown more negatively, often reflecting characteristics that are usually associated with women. Malvolio shows a vanity and conceit that is often associated with women. Sir Andrew is an empty-headed fool and a coward, again showing an irrationality and lack of resolve more commonly associated with woman when depicting them as the weaker sex. Orsino, with his serenades and words of lobe, symbolizes men's characteristic feature of deceiving women by lies and ornate words full of compliments while offering no real love. Orsino signifies how men are deceptive in their love and view women superficially as just objects of male desire but with no respect: .

There is no woman's sides  
 Can bide the beating of so strong a passion  
 As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart  
 So big, to hold so much; they lack retention  
 Alas, their love may be call'd appetite,  
 No motion of the liver, but the palate,  
 That suffer surfeit, cloyment and revolt  
 But mine is all as hungry as the sea,  
 And can digest as much: make no compare  
 Between that love a woman can bear me  
 And that I owe Olivia (Act 2, Scene 4, lines 91-101).

Viola's response, "We men may say more, swear more: but indeed / Our shows are more than will; for still we prove / Much in our vows, but little in our love" shows that men also deceive women with their gaudy and impactful words and that women have an emotional depth that such manipulative masculine rhetoric fails to appreciate.

In another of William Shakespeare's comedies, the pastoral *As You Like It*, when we analyse the role of women in *As You Like It*, we can see that the character of Rosalind in *As You Like It* is both restricted and empowered as a woman within the play, illustrated through the play's focus on the practice of disguise in Shakespearean theatre. Throughout the play, we observe that women tend to act like men, while men tend to act like women, quite contrary to the conventions of the Elizabethan era. For instance, disguised as Ganymede, Rosalind looks down on Phoebe. After this scornful event, Phoebe decides to send Rosalind a scathing letter that expresses her resentment towards her. Rosalind shares her personal opinion about the

letter with Silvius, who delivers the letter to her and asserts that a woman cannot write such a harshly worded letter. “Women’s gentle brain / Could not drop forth such giant-rude invention, / Such Ethiop words, blacker in their effect / Than in their countenance” (IV.ii.55–57).

To give another example, Oliver addresses Rosalind: “Be of good cheer, youth. You a man? You lack a man’s heart” (IV. ii.191). In this scene, Rosalind succumbs to her emotions, which makes her a typical woman, particularly in the traditions of courtly love. A man would be able to manage his emotions more strongly in accordance with the Elizabethan culture. This intermingling of gender roles refers to a blithe but subversive attempt on Shakespeare’s part by highlighting Rosalind’s tender heart although she herself dismisses this. In the epilogue of the play, Rosalind gives up her disguise and delivers one last set of lines to the audience. “It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue, but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue” (V.iv.196–197). This highlights how gender identity played a significant role in Elizabethan theatre and culture, and denotes that blurring gender roles in *As You Like It* is a key feature of the play.

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* is another of William Shakespeare’s comedies, which is focused on the reversal of gender roles in a feminist context. The play deserves being designated as a feminist play with its strong female characters, gender role reversal and untraditional ending, which does not promise marriage<sup>1</sup>. Death replaces marriage. Female characters command the alienation of the lovers. The reversal of gender roles between the men and women throughout the play is, indeed, indicative of a flexible depiction of gender. It is undeniable that overtly patriarchal and conventional trends are available in Shakespeare’s plays. Nonetheless, it is significant how Shakespeare handled patriarchal themes in his plays. McEachern suggests that, “Shakespeare defies control of patriarchy, separating and individuating his own identity from that of his literary authority” (McEachern 1988: 289). Although Shakespeare does not renounce the traditional expectations of gender or dominance of patriarchy in his works entirely, he creates alternative ways for his feminist characters to some extent (Thamman, 2017), as implied by Bhavya Thamman in her article “Love’s Labour’s Lost and Feminism”. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost* three men make an agreement to reject women for three years and the whole play is based on men’s reactions to this agreement. Kristian Smidt illustrates the play as “a general contest of the sexes for superiority” at its most basic level (Smidt 1984: 205). The portrayal of women compared to the men is very intriguing. While the voices of men are heard more than women in the majority of the play, women are undoubtedly characterized to be more moral and virtuous in general. Smidt argues that, “the men are foolish, vain, not serious in love [...] they need a lesson and fortunately begin to learn it in the course of the play,” however, the women are characterized as “sensible, realistic, generous, serious in love, altogether morally superior beings” (Smidt 1984: 206). This depiction bears the implication that Shakespeare fictionalizes women superior to men in every sense.

Love is a sign of weakness or the loss of self-control for men in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Men in the play desire strength, self-control, and intelligence as the symbols of stereotypical masculinity. However, they cannot realize these ideals. Although Ferdinand and his men take an oath to keep women out of the court, they cannot abstain from falling in love with the princess and her ladies. Men regard love itself as threatening to their perception of masculinity. Women outsmart men by wearing masks or by switching identities even if men are supposedly better educated or more cunning in wooing. The play sheds light on faulty male assumptions about women seen only as passive objects of desire from the perspective of male characters. Women’s resistance to men’s wooing and their making fun of men’s love letters undermine those assumptions. While the play investigates the wrong assumptions of men about women, it sometimes proves the vice versa. The princess and her ladies suppose that the men mock with their proclamations of love and they are not convinced that they are really in love. Hence, stereotyping about gender works both ways. However, by considering the deal at the end of the play for a year’s break from courtship we can deduce that there is hope for actual love in the future—love that would bring the males and females of the play together beyond facile assumptions about the opposite gender.

As a general overview, Lisa Jardine indicates that Shakespeare’s women *characters “offer insights into women’s perceptions of themselves in a patriarchal world”* (Jardine 1989: 2). In Shakespeare’s tragedies, there is a tendency to bring traditional gender stereotypes to light while his comedies criticize or make fun of them. Therefore, Shakespeare’s tragedies substantiate traditional gender stereotypes while his comedies subvert them. Although identity and gender roles played a significant role in Elizabethan culture and theatre, blurring the line between gender roles as Shakespeare did was both highly subversive and challenging.

<sup>1</sup><https://bhavyathamman.wordpress.com/2017/10/27/loves-labours-lost-and-feminism/>

Shakespeare's creation of more independent and autonomous female characters in his plays was a very radical demeanour, compared with the conditions of typical women in Elizabethan society. Lady Macbeth has remarkable power and autonomy with her role of instigator for the sake of the crown. Viola proves herself with her skills and intelligence, while Rosalind manages her own romance and other characters. Women characters mostly end up either dead or married. However, the transversal of gender roles throughout the play can be attributed to Shakespeare's effort to re-establish traditional gender roles, especially considering the expectations of his period from women.

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