# Models for Portraying Women in Shakespeare's Plays: Ophelia, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra

# نماذج لتصوير النساء في مسرحيات شكسبير: أوفيليا وليدي ماكبث وكليوباترا

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**الكلمات المفتاحية:** نماذج نسوية،الاعراف الاجتماعية،مسرحيات، اوفيليا،كيلوباترا.

**Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2024  Volume: 14 Issue :4**
**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)    (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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الخلاصة

تتلخص هذه الدراسة بأختيار ثلاث نماذج نسوية في ثلاث من مسرحيات شكسبير – أوفيليا من مسرحية (هاملت) وليدي ماكبث من مسرحية (ماكبث) وكليوباترا من مسرحية (أنتوني وكليوباترا) –. تستكشف الدراسة مواقف هؤلاء النساء وأهدافهن ووسائل تحدي الأعراف الاجتماعية من خلال استكشاف شخصياتهن . الدراسة تنظر الى كيفية تصوير شكسبير لهذه الشخصيات النسائية مع أنظمة السلطة وأدوار الجنسين في عصره. تبحث الدراسة أيضًا بتأثير هذه النماذج النسائية على كيفية النظرة إلى النساء الآن وكيف يتم تصويرهن في الأدب. الهدف العام للدراسة هو تقديم فهم شامل للتمثيلات المعقدة والمتنوعة للمرأة في جميع أعمال شكسبير. تمثل أوفيليا، من مسرحية "هاملت"، البراءة والضعف المأساوي. وتسلط شخصيتها الضوء على القيود والتوقعات المفروضة على النساء في المجتمع الأبوي في ذلك الوقت. ويشكل انحدار أوفيليا إلى الجنون تعليقًا قويًا على تأثير المعايير المجتمعية القمعية على الصحة العقلية للنساء. ومن ناحية أخرى، تتحدى الليدي ماكبث الأدوار الجنسانية التقليدية بطموحها ومكرها وتلاعبها. وتتحدى شخصيتها التمثيلات النمطية للمرأة في عصر شكسبير، حيث تسعى بنشاط إلى السلطة

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)      (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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والسيطرة. وتسلط الحالة العقلية المتدهورة لليدي ماكبث ووفاتها في النهاية الضوء على عواقب الطموح غير المقيد والاضطرابات الداخلية لامرأة تسعى جاهدة للتنقل في عالم يهيمن عليه الذكور. تظهر كليوباترا، كما صورت في "أنطوني وكليوباترا"، كشخصية متعددة الأوجه تجمع بين العاطفة والمرونة والذكاء السياسي. يتجاوز تصويرها الصور النمطية التبسيطية، ويصور امرأة قادرة على ممارسة نفوذ كبير وأسر من حولها بكاريزميتها. تتحدى طبيعة كليوباترا المعقدة المفاهيم التقليدية للأنوثة، وتوضح عمق وتنوع أدوار وهويات النساء.
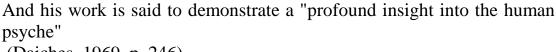
## Abstract

The subject of this study is the image of women in three of Shakespeare's plays—*Hamlet*'s Ophelia, *Macbeth*'s Lady Macbeth, and *Antony and Cleopatra*'s Cleopatra—. The study explores these women's positions, goals, and means of challenging social norms as it explores their characterizations. It looks at how Shakespeare's portrayal of these female characters speaks to the power systems and gender roles of his day. The study also examines how these women prototypes have affected how women are perceived now and how they are portrayed in literature. The study's overall goal is to offer a thorough grasp of the intricate and varied representations of women throughout Shakespeare's works. Ophelia, from "Hamlet," represents innocence and tragic vulnerability. Her character highlights the constraints and expectations placed upon women in the patriarchal society of the time. Ophelia's descent into madness serves as a powerful commentary on the impact of oppressive societal norms on women's mental health. Cleopatra, as depicted in "Antony and Cleopatra," emerges as a multifaceted character encompassing passion, resilience, and political acumen. Her portrayal transcends simplistic stereotypes, portraying a woman capable of wielding considerable influence and captivating those around her with her charisma. Cleopatra's complex nature challenges conventional notions of femininity, illustrating the depth and diversity of women's roles and identities.

## 1.1 Introduction

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in English literature. His literary masterpieces are not only artistically excellent, but also serve to explore the limits of the human mind. Shakespeare's skill lies not only in creating the various aspects of human life, but also in portraying them in a more impressive and brilliant manner than anyone before him. The idea that life is like a drama, with moments of happiness and sadness, is beautifully expressed in his works and has helped to keep his legacy alive. ( Dudková,2011:P.8)

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)    (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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And his work is said to demonstrate a "profound insight into the human psyche"
(Daiches, 1969, p. 246).

William Shakespeare continues to be a contentious figure during the Renaissance era, with divergent and conflicting perspectives held by both individuals and critics. Shakespeare's personal life is characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty, which gives rise to unresolved inquiries and stimulates examination of his literary creations. It is unsurprising that numerous individuals endeavour to explore his works, which are frequently marked by ambiguity, in order to address developing inquiries. Diverse perspectives exist on Shakespeare's character and the analysis of his literary works, leading to a wide range of interpretations ( Rathi,2012:P.1)

The theater scene in Shakespeare's time  is also crucial as women were not allowed to perform on stage. Acting was considered discourteous for women, so young boy actors between the ages of ten and sixteen played the roles of women, including mature characters like Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth. The audience in playhouses was divided into two types: the first one commoners, including louts, pickpockets, servant and prostitutes; while the other educated men and women, critics, scholars, and respectable members of royal families. (Dey,2019:P.3)

In spite of this stratification, Shakespeare depicts two distinct categories of women in his theatrical works: those who exhibit submissiveness, obedience, and moral rectitude, and those who demonstrate independence, dominance, and assume malevolent roles. During Shakespeare's time, women were often regarded as weak and vulnerable. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is portrayed as a symbol of this vulnerability, as she obediently follows the wishes and orders of her father and brothers. The protagonist's obedient position is exploited, as Polonius employs her as a means to surveil Hamlet. Although Ophelia loves  Hamlet, she ultimately rejects him as a demonstration of obedience towards her father. Once she says that:

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
-------o, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I
see! (Hamlet ,III, I, P.66) ( Gupta &Dr. Tiwari,2017:P.93)

In examining some of Shakespeare's most memorable and artistically crafted female characters, the character of Cleopatra stands out as a particularly interesting subject of discussion. Although Cleopatra was

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)      (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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portrayed negatively in all the sources that Shakespeare drew upon for his play, his creation of her character is not entirely negative. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra is depicted as a strong, independent, manipulative, responsible, and cunning woman who was the Queen of Egypt and embodied all the characteristics of a true queen. Her portrayal weakens male characters such as Antony, a great warrior who betrays his own people and fights against them due to his intoxicating love for Cleopatra. In this play, we also witness Cleopatra as a true warrior who remains loyal to her own people, and charges into the battlefield despite being a woman. We hear her saying:

Sink Rome, and their tongues rot

That speak against us! A charge we bear i'th' war.

And, as the president of my kingdom, will

Appear there for a man. Speak not against it!

I will not stay behind. (Antony and Cleopatra, III, vii, P.107)

(Dey,2019:P.3)

In the play *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a character of significant influence and efficacy. The female character is shown as possessing greater strength and intelligence in comparison to her spouse, who is characterised by traits of vulnerability, ambition, and fidelity. Lady Macbeth's fervent desire to ascend to the throne and appoint her husband as the monarch of Scotland compels her to perpetrate malevolent actions in order to realise her aspiration. In the play, she is depicted as a malevolent and influential entity over her spouse, particularly in the initial two acts. While the bond between Lady Macbeth and her husband is founded on intimacy, affection, and assistance, her impact in the play is characterised by the malevolent deeds she perpetrates (Zhra & Bedda,2018/2019:P.35)

## 1.2 Problem of the Study

The problem of the study lies in studying how women are portrayed in Shakespeare's plays, specifically in the context of the characters Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra. It also examines how women were viewed during that period and how it sheds light on the importance of representing women in literature.

## Literature Review

Shakespeare's plays and sonnets often explore themes of male dominance and control, reflecting the limited power and property women had during the Elizabethan era. Women were deprived of education, and gender-based discrimination and violence were common in domestic disputes. (Rackin, 2005, p. 7).

Men may feel threatened by powerful women, which could be a source of

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)    (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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their anxiety. Analyzing Shakespeare's work from this perspective may be challenging, as his writing reflects a masculine viewpoint and vocabulary. Misogyny is a pervasive theme in literature, with men typically seen as the foundation of all literature, while women are relegated to "the other" (Donovan, 1989, pp. 4-5).

The portrayal of female characters in theatrical plays is influenced by two primary aspects. Initially, Shakespeare's works were intended for the English stage, where exclusively male players were permitted, perhaps constraining the availability of female characters for casting. Furthermore, he catered to readers who were inclined towards narratives that centred around male encounters, rather than those that were crucial to women's existence (kemp,2010, p.66).

Ophelia, a captivating and amiable young woman, is the progeny of Polonius, a prominent and esteemed member of Claudius' court. Ophelia, a female figure of notable distinction, is held in high regard by the royal family of Elsinore. However, she is constrained in her ability to exercise her freedom of action, self-expression, and independent thought. Ophelia's behaviours, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts are constrained by the patriarchal society of her era, which is enforced by the royal family. Women in this era were subjected to male dominance, which had a detrimental impact on their individual lives and societal entitlements. Ophelia and all the ladies residing in Elsinore are clearly bound by the limitations imposed by a patriarchal culture.

Ophelia faces numerous challenges due to living in a patriarchal society, which are highlighted throughout the plot of *Hamlet*. According to Romanska, Ophelia is depicted as "lifeless but still sexually desirable" (2005: 486).

This circumstance places Ophelia in a position where she is expected to conform to traditional gender roles. Ophelia is depicted in this patriarchal culture as either the virtuous and untainted "Fair Ophelia," exemplifying the attributes of an ideal, innocent, and young virgin, or as a feeble and susceptible young woman as a result of her madness, so reinforcing conventional feminine stereotypes (Teker, 2006: 113).

Ophelia is subjected to the constraints imposed by male authority and has a dearth of agency in articulating her own thoughts and concepts. She is incapable of making decisions for herself and merely echoes what she is told, demonstrating compliance, uncertainty, and subservience. According to Fischer (1990: 2), Ophelia's lines are often incomplete and lack power.

Due to Hamlet's prominence and his soliloquies, Ophelia's voice is

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)      (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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drowned out, rendering her character less significant. Feminist critic Lee R. Edwards highlights that "it is not feasible to construct Ophelia's life story from the text: while we can conceive of Hamlet's story without Ophelia, Ophelia's story cannot exist without Hamlet" (1979: 36), indicating the lack of autonomy and importance given to Ophelia's character.

The Western patriarchal culture had a significant impact on the health of women. The lack of awareness among men regarding women's autonomy to express themselves and their bodies in specific manners was evident. The male gaze has traditionally admired the female body, and during the Renaissance period, men regarded women's bodies as their property and sought to dominate them (Ortiz, 2013).

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a tragedy that is brief yet carries significant emotional weight, making it one of his most impactful works. As stated by Shanley (307), *Macbeth* illustrates the complete destruction of the human spirit, leading to a paralyzing effect.

*Macbeth* is Shakespeare's briefest tragedy it remains highly impactful and emotionally charged. The play depicts the profound devastation and immobilization of the human spirit (Shanley 307).

Similar to other plays written by Shakespeare, *Macbeth* explores the topic of kingship and examines the challenges that arise regarding legitimacy and succession when it comes to significant political power held by the monarch, court, and royal councils (Hadfield 27).

According to Berggren, Shakespeare depicts women as significant factors in the actions of men, but their roles vary across his works and can be categorized as either "good or evil, victims or monsters" (18, 11).

Shakespeare's depiction of Lady Macbeth is frequently associated with the unfavourable and severe perception of women in mediaeval times, which was shaped by the sexist ideology prevalent in society. However, as stated by Mrs. Siddons, who portrayed the character of Lady Macbeth, "this remarkable character embodies a woman in whom the ambition has nearly erased all the qualities of human nature, and whose makeup comprises all the dominating powers of intellect and all the allure and elegance of personal beauty" (Campbell, 1991, p. 31).

As stated by Wright (1939), Lady Macbeth is a female character driven by ambition, with a resolute determination to attain a more elevated social standing for both herself and her spouse. Upon receiving news of Macbeth's new title and increased land, she promptly and calmly formulates a strategy to raise Macbeth to the status of king, rather than a mere indentured servant (Wright, 1939, p.97).

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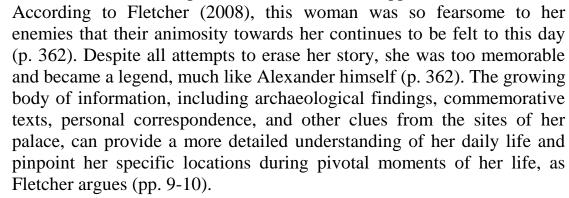*(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)    (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)*

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The tragic defect of Lady Macbeth lies in her profound aspiration to elevate her husband's rank to the Scottish throne, serving as a foreshadowing device for Macbeth's own fatal flaw. Hazlitt (2009) constructs that Lady Macbeth's transgression was an overabundance of the powerful principle of self-interest and familial progress, which is widespread in primitive communities and eras and is not governed by the universal sentiments of empathy and fairness (p.25). Lady Macbeth, driven by her feminine fervour to elevate her family to the status of royalty, finally facilitates her husband's accession to the throne.

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale, Her infinite variety" (Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii. 235-240). According to Schiff (2010, p. 8), Shakespeare acknowledged Cleopatra's boundless diversity in these lines, recognizing her as one of the most well-known figures in history.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra endures beyond his other female protagonists due to her charismatic and inspiring character, exhibiting immense physical power, an unwavering determination, and mesmerising theatrical magnificence. According to Bloom (2017), in Shakespeare's works, Cleopatra stands out as the most metamorphic character.

Bloom emphasises Shakespeare's depiction of Cleopatra as the most cunning and formidable figure, widely acknowledged, because of his skill in manipulating the different viewpoints of her character. She is regarded as the quintessential embodiment of the star, the inaugural celebrity in the world, who transcends her admirers, such as Pompey, Caesar, and Antony, who are solely acknowledged for their achievements and eventual misfortunes. In contrast to others, Cleopatra does not require any accomplishments, as her demise is victorious rather than tragic, and she continues to be renowned for her fame (Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, p. 546-547).

Schiff (2010) clarifies that Cleopatra's mystique and allure are enhanced by her disappearance. The gaps in her story continue to captivate us with her feminine ambition, power, and achievements (pp. 264-265).

According to Fletcher (2008), this woman was so fearsome to her enemies that their animosity towards her continues to be felt to this day (p. 362). Despite all attempts to erase her story, she was too memorable and became a legend, much like Alexander himself (p. 362). The growing body of information, including archaeological findings, commemorative texts, personal correspondence, and other clues from the sites of her palace, can provide a more detailed understanding of her daily life and pinpoint her specific locations during pivotal moments of her life, as Fletcher argues (pp. 9-10).

Frye (2008) recognises that Cleopatra is the focal point of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, as she embodies the fundamental nature of theatre. According to the source (p. 233), she has the most prominent female role in the realm of drama and exemplifies the identity of an actress. Cleopatra is a renowned actress who does not have any personal life outside of the stage. Her affection, similar to all other aspects of her, is theatrical, and she never engages in soliloquies. While she may engage in occasional self-talk, she is cognizant of the constant presence of another someone who is actively listening, as stated by Frye (2008, p. 233).

While some critics argue that Cleopatra's swift and unpredictable mood swings suggest that she is fickle or capricious (Cunningham, 1955). Benitez (2019) believes that Cleopatra's decision to dress in her finest garments before committing suicide is seen as honorable and showcases all of her admirable qualities as a woman and divinity.

## Discussion and Analysis

Shakespeare's female characters Ophelia, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra are iconic figures in literature. These characters embody a wide spectrum of femininity, portraying innocence, ambition, allure and complexity. Their enduring appeal lies in their compelling portrayal of the complexities and nuances of the female experience in different historical and social contexts.

## I Ophelia in *Hamlet*

Ophelia is portrayed as a victim of the mistreatment she experiences at the hands of the two main male figures in her life, her father Polonius and her brother Laertes. She is depicted as a beautiful, innocent, and loyal woman who is unaware of the harsh realities of life. Despite Hamlet's mistreatment, she remains devoted to him, and her love for him, along with her loyalty to her father, ultimately leads to tragedy in her life. Ophelia embodies purity and the innocence and virtue expected of women in her society. She obediently follows the commands of the men in her life, even when it goes against her own desires. As she struggles with conflicting expectations, she lacks the strength to overcome her difficulties. Her obedience to her father's rules is so strong that she goes against her own inclinations. The shock of her father's death drives her to madness, ultimately resulting in her tragic demise. (Ms Samuel, S & Ms Pulizala, R. 2019)

## II Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*

Lady Macbeth, also likened to the fourth witch by some critics, holds a prominent position among Shakespeare's tragic heroines. Just as Macbeth stands out among Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Lady Macbeth surpasses other heroines with her strength, grandeur, and influence. She

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print)    (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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complements her husband perfectly, possessing qualities he lacks, thus contributing to the completeness of the tragedy. In the first half of the play, she serves as the guiding force and pivotal figure. Without her, imagining the tragedy of "Macbeth" would be inconceivable.(Ranjan, S. 2024, April 7).

**III Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra***

Cleopatra is portrayed as a strong and passionate character with a wide range of intense emotions. She is depicted as beautiful and sensual, and she symbolizes Egyptian culture. In contrast to Ophelia and Desdemona, she rejects the expectations of a male-dominated society. While she understands her responsibilities as the Queen of Egypt, she is deeply in love with Antony. She is shown as an independent figure who pushes her way into male-dominated spaces. She displays bravery and courage when she confronts death with determination, choosing to control her own destiny rather than enduring the shame of being enslaved by Octavius. (Ms Samuel, S & Ms Pulizala, R. 2019)

Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra are three iconic female characters from Shakespeare's plays, each with distinct personalities and roles within their respective plays. When comparing these characters in terms of themes such as madness, tragedy, and political intrigue, we can see both similarities and differences.

**Madness**

Madness is a recurring theme in the lives of these characters. Ophelia, in *Hamlet*, experiences a profound mental breakdown following the death of her father, Polonius. Her madness is evident in her fragmented and nonsensical speech, as Horatio says of her,

" She speaks much of her father; says she hears

There's tricks I' the world; and hems,

and beats her heart;"( Hamlet,4.5.4-5),

it is possible that her failed relationship with Hamlet may have also contributed to her madness.(Ruck, S. 2015)

In her first song, Ophelia expresses her grief and the recent loss she has experienced, singing,

"He is dead and gone, lady

He is dead and gone,

At his head a green-grass tuft;

At his heels a stone" ( Hamlet,  IV, V, P.94)

This series of words effectively portrays the image of a deceased man and specifically Polonius due to his recent demise. Ophelia lacked a mother figure to guide her through life's challenging moments; instead, she had a father figure whom she adored and consistently obeyed. The central role

that Polonius played in Ophelia's life as a cherished and respected role model only intensified the impact of his death on her conscience. Death is not only a monstrous force in its treatment of a human being, but it also has a widespread effect on loved ones, friends, and even strangers. All these individuals react to death and the news of death in various, unique ways. The strain of such a sudden and tragic event has led to internal chaos and potential madness gnawing at Ophelia. Consequently, the song serves as an outlet for her overwhelming emotions and thoughts. (Sarafin, S. 2016)

Likewise, the opening song explores the theme of Ophelia's sense of abandonment by Hamlet. Although he is not deceased, his existence is no longer with her. in the company of others, sings the words:

"How should I your true love know

From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff

And his sandal shoon" ( Hamlet ,IV.V.23-26).

In the midst of missing her father, Ophelia dedicates a moment to the ache of lost love, questioning the sincerity of that affection. Connected to Hamlet, she is uncertain about Hamlet's love for her during the times they shared. By introducing an unnamed "one" (IV.v.24), Ophelia weighs Hamlet's affections against those of a stranger, deeming them equivalent in their absence. Her song reflects the struggles of a woman coming to terms with the departure of a man who, while still alive, leaves her yearning for his company and questioning the genuineness of his past behaviors. (Sarafin, S. 2016)

In the play, Macbeth ,Shakespeare vividly depicts Lady Macbeth's descent into madness following her knowledge of the horrific murders of Macduff's family. Haunted by sorrow, she is seen sleepwalking, speaking long sentences without awareness. Her erratic behavior includes a compulsive act of repeatedly washing her hands, in a futile attempt to cleanse the imagined bloodstains of Duncan:

"Who knows it when none can call our power

To account? Yet who would have thought the

Old man to have had so much blood in him? …

Here's the smell of the blood still … all the

Perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little

Hand … look not so pale … to bed, to bed,

give me your Hand. "(Macbeth V.I.40-50) (Fatimah, H. 2020)

As Eve, Helen of Troy, Aphrodite, and Pandora who were held accountable for the transgressions of men, Lady Macbeth also finds herself unfairly bearing the guilt. She is frequently labeled as the Fourth

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Witch, accused of causing the downfall of a once faithful knight to the monarch (Fatimah, H. 2020).However, it was actually Macbeth himself who originally harbored traitorous contemplations:

…"why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs." (Macbeth,I.III.136)

In the passage, it is noted that Lady Macbeth has overestimated her own abilities and the level of her ruthlessness.(Fatimah, H. 2020).

"have given stick, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
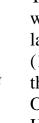
I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have plucked the nipple from his boneless  gums,

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this". (Macbeth, I .VII.58)

This passage is important in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, which suggests that Lady Macbeth's childlessness was a key factor in her descent into madness and eventual downfall. Knights argues that the excerpt does not fit traditional categories like 'fear' or 'disgust' (Prins,2001).When considering Freud's interpretation of Lady Macbeth's madness stemming from her inability to have children, this passage holds significance. However, the idea that her childlessness led to her evil behavior and subsequent madness can be challenged by the argument that it was not her lack of children but her excessive self-worth and ambition that ultimately led to her downfall. In contrast, Cleopatra's character is not overtly associated with madness, but her emotional volatility and larger-than-life persona suggest a different manifestation of inner turmoil. Her dramatic fluctuations between passion and strategic calculation, as well as her ultimate decision to take her own life, showcase the complexities of her emotional and psychological state amidst the political intrigue surrounding her.

**Tragedy**

Tragedy is another central theme that intertwines the lives of these women. Ophelia's sense of self and her ability to express herself through language are constrained by the men in her society, as noted by Fischer (1990). She is depicted as an outsider in the play, lacking agency in her thoughts and speech due to the influence of the male figures around her.

OPHELIA :I think nothing, my lord.

HAMLET: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

OPHELIA :What is, my lord?

HAMLET :Nothing. (Hamlet, II.II. 116-19).

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In comparison to Hamlet, Ophelia is portrayed as a figure of emptiness, symbolizing the lack of recognition and value given to women in the Elizabethan era. The concept of "nothing" is used to represent Ophelia and women who are overlooked by the male gaze, (Irigaray, 1982: 101).highlighting the absence of significance in her life. Ophelia holds herself responsible for Hamlet's erratic behavior, expressing her deep sorrow and despair through her words:

"And I, of all women, am most miserable
Who once believed in his sweet promises
Oh, how unfortunate I am" ( Hamlet,III.I.155-60).

Despite feeling remorseful and still placing trust in men, Ophelia is constantly surrounded by the influence of male figures like Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet. However, these men eventually disappear from her life - Laertes departs, Hamlet kills Polonius, and both Polonius and Hamlet abandon her, leaving her helpless and unable to take action ( Günenç, M.2015)

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth also encapsulates the theme of tragedy as her ambition and guilt ultimately lead to her mental deterioration. Her despair is reflected in her line

"There's knocking at the gate.
Come, come, come, come. Give me your hand.
What's done cannot be undone.
To bed, to / bed, to bed." (*Macbeth*, V, I, lines 69-72).

This quotation evokes a sense of the desire to escape or hide due to wrongdoing. It captures Lady Macbeth's overwhelming guilt, emphasizing the central theme of guilt evident in Shakespeare's work. It portrays Lady Macbeth's fear and anxiety, reflecting her own inner turmoil and the consequences of her actions. (Barrett Bernard & Sasha Fernquist, 2023)

Furthermore, Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* exemplifies the theme of tragedy through her passionate yet ultimately doomed love for Mark Antony.

"O sun,
Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in; darkling stand
The varying shore o' the world." (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 4, Scene 15, Lines 97-99)

Cleopatra expresses her deep sorrow and longing for Antony as she faces the idea of her own demise. She feels that her life is no longer meaningful without Antony, who was like a light in her life. With Antony's fall, she sees their shared light extinguished, lamenting, "Our lamp is spent, it's

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**(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**

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out" (Hacht, et al, 2007). This quote encapsulates the depth of her despair and the profound loss she experiences with Antony's absence.

'Give me my robe, put on my crown;

I have Immortal longings in me: now no more

the juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip'(*Antony and Cleopatra*,V,II,P.202)

so begins Cleopatra's final speech in Shakespeare's tragedy Antony and Cleopatra. Her 'immortal longings' are her longings for immortality, her desire to leave behind the mortal world and enter the next. she observes that she will never again drink Egyptian wine. Mortal pleasures are finished for her now. (Dr. Oliver Tearle, 2022)

**Political Intrigue**

Political intrigue plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of every character. While Ophelia herself is not an active participant in political schemes, she becomes a victim of the power struggles and manipulations within the royal court, highlighting the profound influence of political dynamics on her personal tragedy.

Lady Macbeth, in *Macbeth*, is deeply involved in the political maneuvering that drives her husband's ascent to power. Her influence on Macbeth is significant, and she actively participates in the political plotting to secure their position. Lady Macbeth's words vividly depict her involvement in these schemes:

"O. never

Shall sun that morrow see!

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men

May read strange matters. To begnile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower.

But be the serpent under't. He that's coming

Must be provided for and you shall put This night's great business into my dispatch; Which shall to all our nights and days to come Give

solely sovereign sway and masterdom". (Macbeth I.V.37)

This indicates that Lady Macbeth is extremely confident in the success of her plan and believes that she and Macbeth will attain power and control over the throne for the entirety of their lives. This demonstrates her strong self-assurance. (Mustafa, M. 2011)

After receiving a letter from her husband detailing the witches' prophecy that he will become king, Lady Macbeth shows intense ambition and is determined to see through. She hesitates to directly mention the kingship but confidently states that Macbeth will become what he has been promised.

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be

What thou art promised………( *Macbeth*, I.V.31-33)

However, she worries that her husband may not be ruthless enough to achieve this goal through straightforward methods. (Mustafa, M. 2011)

Cleopatra, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, is a formidable player in the political intrigues of ancient Egypt and Rome. Her relationship with Mark Antony is deeply entwined with the political power struggle between Rome and Egypt. Cleopatra's character epitomizes political intrigue, as she declares: "I am fire and air,

and I'll give the other two elements,

earth and water, to baser creatures"(Antony and Cleopatra, V, II, P.203_204)

Cleopatra's reference to the classical elements, fire and air, emphasizes their spiritual nature. By relinquishing the "other elements," earth and water, she symbolically returns them to the earth, revealing her awareness of the political maneuvering necessary for survival in her realm. (Dr. Oliver Tearle, 2022)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the portrayal of women in Shakespeare's plays such as Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra offer a diverse and nuanced exploration of female characters. Through these iconic figures, Shakespeare delves into the complexities of womanhood, showcasing their strength, fragility, ambition, and vulnerability.

Ophelia, from "Hamlet," represents innocence and tragic vulnerability. Her character highlights the constraints and expectations placed upon women in the patriarchal society of the time. Ophelia's descent into madness serves as a powerful commentary on the impact of oppressive societal norms on women's mental health.

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth challenges traditional gender roles with her ambition, cunning, and manipulation. Her character defies stereotypical representations of women in Shakespeare's era, as she actively seeks power and control. Lady Macbeth's unraveling mental state and eventual demise shed light on the consequences of unchecked ambition and the inner turmoil of a woman striving to navigate a male-dominated world.

Cleopatra, as depicted in "Antony and Cleopatra," emerges as a multifaceted character encompassing passion, resilience, and political acumen. Her portrayal transcends simplistic stereotypes, portraying a woman capable of wielding considerable influence and captivating those around her with her charisma. Cleopatra's complex nature challenges

conventional notions of femininity, illustrating the depth and diversity of women's roles and identities.

Through these three distinct characters, Shakespeare provides a rich tapestry of female representation, showcasing the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of women in different contexts. Their stories resonate across centuries, offering insights into enduring themes of love, power, madness, and societal expectations.

Moreover, the portrayal of these women invites reflection on the broader societal attitudes towards gender, power, and agency. Shakespeare's nuanced approach to female characters sparks discussions about the ever-evolving perceptions of women in literature and the world at large.

In deduction, the depiction of Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra in Shakespeare's plays transcends simple archetypes, offering profound insights into the human experience. Their stories continue to captivate audiences and scholars, inviting exploration, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of womanhood.

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**Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies :2024 Volume: 14 Issue :4
(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)**