

## She-villain in Shakespeare's Tragedies

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### Abstract

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest writers in English language the world has ever seen. He is also called the "Bird of Avon" as he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, United Kingdom. He wrote around fifty plays. Among these, his ten plays fall into the category of tragedy- *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Titus Andronicus*. It is found that male characters play the dominant figure in his tragic plays. But this article will try to explore the role of female characters in Shakespeare's tragic plays as "she-villain". For example, probably the most femme fatale of all, Lady Macbeth is ambitious and manipulative and convinces her husband to kill King Duncan in order to usurp the throne. She attacks her husband's masculinity as he shows conscience about killing the king and urges him on to commit regicide. This leads to Macbeth's own downfall and eventually racked with guilt, Lady Macbeth takes her own life in a fit of madness. In *Hamlet*, it is Gertrude's conspiracy that leads to the murder of her husband, King Hamlet and her quickness in marriage with Claudius raises doubt in her son's mind that causes Prince Hamlet to think of her mother as a traitor. In *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan show false love to their father King Lear and carry out all the evil activities to have their desire fulfilled. Thus, these female characters play the role of "she-villain" in an appropriate way to bring about the death and destruction of the heroes as well as theirs too.

**Keywords:** She-villain, Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, Goneril, Regan.

One of the major tragedies of Shakespeare is *Macbeth*. The eponymous character, Macbeth is the protagonist of the play though he plays the role of villainous character in this play. He is the dominant character throughout the play. His wife Lady Macbeth also plays an important role in this play. She greatly influences her husband to execute the evil act (killing of King Duncan) to have her desire fulfilled (to become the queen of Scotland). She is ruthless, cruel, powerful and ambitious woman. She appears before the audience for the first time in the scene-V of Act-I when she comes to know about the prophecy witches made that Macbeth will be the future king of Scotland and therefore Lady Macbeth the queen of Scotland through a letter. After going through

it, she begins to lurk the desire of becoming the queen of Scotland in her heart. But she becomes afraid of the nature of her husband. Because she thinks that her husband is too soft and cowardly to “catch the nearest way” i.e. murder. She addresses the invisible spirits to turn her motherly feelings into the feelings of bitter hatred. Her wickedness is better expressed in these words: “look like th’ innocent flower, / But be the serpent under”. She advises her husband to appear like an innocent flower from his outward look and to keep his wickedness covert. She also tells her husband if he shows the signs of fear, it will betray the purpose. Hence, he should leave everything else to her. When King Duncan arrives at the castle of Macbeth, time and place appear to be appropriate to execute their act. But Macbeth shrinks back saying that the king has bestowed enough honours on him. Then Lady Macbeth tries to persuade him to kill King Duncan saying that she would forego the tender love of mother and tear the child smiling at her face and kill it mercilessly if it is needed to redeem her pledge. After all, poked by the words of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth kills King Duncan: “I have done the deed”. After killing King Duncan, Macbeth becomes completely absorbed in his own thought and describes the ‘sorry sight’ of murder to Lady Macbeth. But she does not get much influenced by the words of her husband and remains unmoved to her purpose. Like a brave and clever woman, she asks him not to brood over it and carry the daggers and mark the guards with blood so that the guards are called to be the criminal of this inhuman act. After doing this inhuman act, as much Macbeth gets scared, so does Lady Macbeth try to rouse his courage. Like an adept villain, she pretends to be unaware of what happened. She asks Macduff to let her know about the matter in such a manner that she does not know anything. She pretends to be exhausted hearing the news: “Help me hence, Ho!” After a series of murders, Lady Macbeth perceives their fault. She understands that nothing is gained but they have lost all, for though they have got their desire, it has brought no contentment to their soul. She feels it is better to be with the dead who enjoy peace than to live in anxiety and fear by murder: “Nought’s had, all’s spent, / Where our desire is got without content: / ‘tis safer to be that which we destroy, / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy”. In a feast when Macbeth sees the ghost of King Duncan and becomes agitated, Lady Macbeth tries to manage this action saying that Macbeth suffers from this fit often and has been so since his youth. When Rosse asks Macbeth what sight he has seen, Lady Macbeth fearing that the guilt will be exposed, requests all lords not to speak forth. She excuses that he gets worse and worse, and questions will make him angrier and more agitated. Finally, like Macbeth Lady Macbeth too becomes the victim of this fit. She begins to suffer from somnambulism i.e. sleep walking. In this way, like a true villain, Lady Macbeth persuades to carry out the evil act and becomes the cause of death and destruction of her husband as well as herself.

*Hamlet* is another important play among Shakespeare’s major tragedies. Though prince Hamlet is the protagonist of the play, his mother Gertrude is a key figure in the event which inspires and compels him to take revenge. She remains passive in the first part of the play. How much she is guilty is not explicit to the readers. Because it is very rare that she appears to be bad or pretentious in her speech. She is not as cruel, greedy, wicked and selfish in her speech as Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan are. Gertrude’s love for Hamlet is expressed when she asks him not to return to Wittenberg: “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. I pray thee stay with us, go

not to Wittenberg.” When Hamlet gets agitated for the unknown reason of his father’s death, she tries to pacify his mind saying that it is natural to die because all who lives must die one day: “All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity.” In her speech, it is also seen that she realizes the cause of Hamlet insanity: “I doubt it no other but the main, His father’s death and our o’erhasty marriage.” It is the hastiness in their marriage which leads Hamlet to think that his mother might also be the part of conspiracy in his father’s death. Readers never find Gertrude to be deceitful and tricky in her speech. Rather she remains artless and warns Polonius not to be artful: “More matter, with less art.” There goes on a lengthy conversation between Hamlet and his mother Gertrude about the play organised by Hamlet to explore the truth of his father’s death. She warns Hamlet not to frighten her and says if he does so, he will hurt his mother as well as his father. To reply, Hamlet accuses his mother that she has rather hurt his father much more. His reply is at par with his mother’s question:

Gertrude: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Gertrude: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

Gertrude gets mystified at the wild behaviour of Hamlet. She asks him if he has forgotten her. Then he answers her in a roundabout way: “No, by the rood, not so! /You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife. /And (would it were not so!) you are my mother.” Gertrude becomes angry at this answer and frightens him to be punished by the servants. In contrast, Hamlet frightens his mother and says that he will not let her go till she realizes the guilt she has done. When Hamlet rebukes and accuses his mother of being a part of the conspiracy to kill his father, she replies in such a way that she seems to confess her guilt: “O Hamlet, speak no more! /Thou turns mine eyes into my very soul, /And there I see such black and grained spots /As will no leave their tinct.” But at the end of the play, she wilfully disobeys Claudius by drinking the poisoned wine. She dies with the cries of ‘the drink!, the drink!, I am poisoned’ and in doing so identifies Claudius as her killer. This, then, gives Hamlet the means and motive for revenge, which he has soliloquised over and struggled with throughout the play.

*King Lear* is one of Shakespeare’s major tragedies. It tells the fatal story of King Lear brought about by his elder daughters- Goneril and Regan as he could not distinguish between the false love of Goneril and Regan and the true love of Cordelia, his youngest daughter. In this play, the aging king decides to distribute his property among his daughters in proportionate to their love for him and asks his daughters to express their love for him one by one, beginning with the eldest one. Among his three daughters, the elders’ ones- Goneril and Regan are very cruel, greedy, selfish and wicked, and possibly the most dangerous and villainous female character of Shakespeare’s tragedies. In contrast, Cordelia is pure at heart. Pretention is alien to her nature. She is the favourite of her father. Being eldest daughter, Goneril begins to flatter King Lear through her pretentious words. She says that she loves her father too much to be expressed in words. He is ‘Dearer than eyesight’ to her. She also says that she loves him more than her life and voice, ‘speech unable’.

Then Regan tells in her turn that she loves her father as much as Goneril does. Accordingly, she demands the same amount of property as much as Goneril deserves: "And prize me at her worth". Again she expresses her love for him in another way: "And I am alone felicitate /In your dear highness' love." Finally when King Lear addresses his youngest daughter, Cordelia to speak about her love for him, she replies 'Nothing, my lord'. King Lear gets surprised hearing the reply of Cordelia and tells her that if she has no word of love for him, she will get nothing of property. Then she says that she loves him as much as a daughter should love her father: "... I love your majesty /According to my bond, nor more nor less". She also says that after her marriage her love, care and duty will be divided into halves between husband and father. She adds that she cannot love her father as much as her married sisters promise to do. Consequently, blinded by the flattery of his elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, King Lear disowns Cordelia from his property and gives away his property between his two elder daughters. It is determined that King Lear will spend half the year in the house of Goneril and half in the house of Regan. Then Goneril's villainous character comes out as she begins to behave rudely with her father. She wants to sack the retinue of King Lear accusing of their behaviour and neglects King Lear for his old age. Getting angry at her conduct, King Lear calls Goneril 'Detested kite!' and wishes that she might give birth to a child who would behave in the same way she has done to her father: "...that she may feel /How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is /To have thankless child!" when King Lear tells Regan about the ruthless conduct of Goneril uttering the words "O Regan she has tied /Sharp-tooth'd unkindness, like a vulture here:", Regan takes the side of Goneril and speaks "I cannot think my sister in the least /Would fail her obligation:" Rather she accuses her father of his old age and tells him to return to her sister and ask forgiveness "That to our sister you do make return; /Say you have wrong'd her, sir". The villainous part of their characters is well expressed when Regan orders to hang Gloucester and Goneril orders to 'pluck out his eyes' for helping in their father's escape. Regan plucks his beard as well. Finally they begin to brawl over the man of their love attraction and bring themselves their death and destruction. In this way they prove themselves to be she-villains of Shakespeare's plays

After all, through deep discussion and interpretation of Shakespeare's major tragedies, this article tries explore the role of female characters as she-villains, namely- Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Gertrude in *Hamlet*, and Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*. Besides these female villains there are other two she-villains- Sycorax in *Tempest* and Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*. Sycorax is an unseen character. She is a vicious and powerful witch. She is actually dead before the play begins but acts as a foil to Prospero. She enslaves Ariel and instructs her illegitimate son Caliban to worship the demon god Sebetos. Caliban believes that the island is his due to her colonization of it from Algiers. In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora's cruelty is well expressed when she encourages her son to rape Lavinia for the purpose of her revenge. For her crimes, she is fed her dead son in a pie and then killed and fed to the wild beasts. Among all the she-villains of Shakespeare's plays discussed in this article, Gertrude is less villainous character than others as her wickedness is not expressed explicitly in her speech. She does not express her special love for Claudius, nor does she express hatred toward Hamlet. Her hasty marriage lets the readers consider that she might be the

part of conspiracy to kill Hamlet's father. But Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan are explicitly villainous characters. Their ruthlessness, wickedness and selfish nature are well expressed in their speeches. Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to carry out the evil act and becomes successful to have her husband done it. But like a villain, she leads to the death and destruction of hero as well as herself. Goneril and Regan are different from Lady Macbeth though they all are greedy and wicked, and they can go beyond any boundary if it is needed to fulfil their desire. They are different in the sense that they betray their father and finally they become the cause of their death and destruction for the man of their love attraction. Thus, this article tries enough to explore the role of female characters of Shakespeare's major tragedies as she-villains and the title of this article becomes well justified.

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