INDIAN STREAMS RESEARCH JOURNAL
ISSN NO : 2230-7850
IMPACT FACTOR : 5.1651 (UIF)
VOLUME - 14 | ISSUE - 9 | OCTOBER – 2024

WOMEN AT ODDS IN SHAKESPEARE

Richa Bajaj
Associate Professor, Hindu College, Delhi University.

ABSTRACT:

Women in sixteenth-century England occupied a marginalized position within a patriarchal society that restricted their roles in property, power, and public life. Shakespeare, acutely aware of these social limitations, explored the condition of women with remarkable depth and variety across his works. His female characters can be broadly divided into three archetypes. The first group—embodied by Miranda, Juliet, Ophelia, Hero, Desdemona, Gertrude, Cordelia, and Kate—reflects innocence and victimhood, mirroring the subservient realities of Elizabethan womanhood. The second group, including Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra, reveals women's complex engagement with ambition, politics, and authority, often challenging male dominance through intellect and willpower. The third group—Rosalind, Viola, Beatrice, and Portia—represents Shakespeare's comic heroines, whose wit, resilience, and self-awareness subtly critique the gender inequalities of their time. Collectively, these portrayals illuminate Shakespeare's nuanced understanding of women's social, emotional, and intellectual struggles, offering insight into both the realities and the aspirations of women in Renaissance England.

KEYWORDS: *Renaissance England; female archetypes; patriarchy; power and politics; comic heroines; tragedy; feminist literary criticism.*

Women in sixteenth-century England lived on the margins of society, often regarded with pity, prejudice, and indifference. Their role in matters of property, wealth, and privilege was minimal, and they were expected to accept their inferior status without question—seen primarily as supporters of men in their relentless pursuit of success and power. Few, perhaps, understood this reality more deeply than Shakespeare.[1]

Shakespeare's works present three distinct types of female characters. The first category consists of women who embody innocence and victimhood, such as Miranda, Juliet, Ophelia, Hero, Desdemona,

[1] Stephen Greenblatt is of the opinion that,"The great majority of women in the kingdom had very restricted social, economic, and legal standing. To be sure, a tiny number of influential aristocratic women, such as the formidable Countess of Shrewsbury, Bess of Hardwick, wielded considerable power. But, these rare exceptions aside, women were denied any rightful claim to institutional authority or personal autonomy...When Sir Thomas Smith thinks of how he should describe his country's social order, he declares that "we do not reject women, as those whom nature hath made to keep home, and to nourish their family and children, and not to meddle with matters abroad, nor to bear office in a city or commonwealth." Then, with a kind over his shoulder, he makes an exception of those few for whom "the blood is respected, not the age nor the sex": for example, the queen. (Greenblatt 9).

Gertrude, Cordelia, and Kate (Hotspur's wife). These characters offer realistic portrayals of how women behaved—or were treated—in sixteenth-century society.

The second category consists of women who are deeply rooted in the material realities of power and politics. Characters like Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra actively engage in state affairs, playing the game of power with skill equal to—or surpassing—that of their male counterparts. Driven by ambition and greed for power, they stand out for their strength and strategic acumen, often outperforming the men around them, for better or worse.

The third group includes Rosalind, Viola, Beatrice, and Portia, who represent the comic prototype—spirited, romantic, and full of energy. These women are mentally agile and intellectually daring in their own way. Though aware of their social limitations, they possess the ability to navigate success through wit and charm. They reveal a more ideological than realistic side of Shakespeare's portrayal of women, as he imbues them with a subtle undercurrent of resentment, critical awareness, and defiance.

Through the sixteenth century English society had been witness to a slow but firm change occurring in it and setting stage for imaginative minds such as Shakespeare to explore possibilities of a new life-pattern. Women in Shakespeare seldom move up the social ladder; rarely do they talk of religion, God, transcendence, the spirit, the moral universe, philosophy, scholarship and erudition – aspects that are aimed at Idea or ideal. This is not to suggest that women aren't capable of engaging with these in Shakespeare's scheme of things but only that they relate with their world primarily as humans, products of the clashing manners and motives in a changing circumstance. They give the impression of accepting what they see, thinking about and struggling to comprehend what they confront. An important virtue of Shakespeare's creative genius is to show the hard and concrete substance of life that women of his plays typify.

I

In the first category of women we find young innocent women such as Miranda, Desdemona and Ophelia. They are impressionable, protected by doting fathers, who place their honour and faith in them. Miranda, the only woman character in *The Tempest* has a little more than hundred lines in the play, but is very much the centre of comment and action even when she is not the principal agent and is more of a catalyst. She possesses maidenly virtues, being sweet and innocent, is obedient to her father, yet she asserts her willfulness in going to see her lover when her father "is hard at study. Pray now, rest yourself./He's safe for these three hours" (3.1.22-23). She meets Ferdinand on equal terms. In fact, she is quick to ask him, "Do you love me?" (3.1.80) and soon determines, "I am your wife if you will marry me./ If not, I'll die your maid". To be doubly sure she extracts the promise from Ferdinand in "My husband, then?", which he can't retract from. In doing so, she projects her desire in no uncertain terms and directs her lover in declaring his love for her leading to the proposal of marriage. Miranda thus exercises both agency and free will in her dealings with Ferdinand.

On the other hand, when she is with Caliban, Miranda acts as a superior, much like her father, commanding respect and obedience from the native 'slave'. She is aware of hierarchies and ensures their continuance in the relationship she builds with Caliban. She calls him "Abhorrèd slave", and reminds him that "I pitied thee,/ Took pains to make thee speak" and "I endowed thy purposes" with words so he could understand his own self. She thus tried to civilise "A thing most brutish". At one level, she endowed meaning in Caliban, the same as Prospero endowed her with knowledge. However, Caliban transgressed in taking Miranda to be an equal and making advances towards her. Note the power dynamic, Miranda racially considers herself superior to Caliban who belongs to a "vile race", she on the other hand is white and civilised. However in terms of gender the hierarchy gets reversed. She being a woman is a victim of Caliban's attempted rape. The slave is punished and confined to a rock (1.2.422-36).

Miranda understands the mechanism of societies even when she is not a part of it, living on a secluded island. She is taught well by Prospero who admits she is better equipped than most princes in

knowledge and learning. To quote Prospero, "I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit/ Than other princes can, that have more time/ For vainer hours and tutors not so careful" (1.2.205-8). Miranda is thus a dynamic character appearing as both innocent and worldly-wise in turns. In the framework of romance, her innocence is rewarded as she enters into a conjugal harmony with Ferdinand. However, this is not the fate of many heroines of Shakespeare who suffer because of their innocence.

Ophelia in *Hamlet* too is introduced as young and innocent but she remains trapped in the dominating male order. Surrounded and used by men such as her father, brother and lover, the absence of a mother figure leads to her complete isolation and destruction. Gertrude plays a distant role compensating the absent mother only when Ophelia has been driven to madness and death. The queen is caught in her own quagmire, and is unable to rescue the young girl from the clutches of male politics.

Ophelia toes the line following the instructions of her father and brother. Polonius and Laertes wouldn't allow Ophelia to speak more than is required and are on a mission to know her plans, if any, with respect to a possible and feared alliance with Hamlet. On getting specific instructions from Laertes ("do not sleep,/ But let me hear from you"), she makes the uncertain query: "Do you doubt that?" At this Laertes elaborates his intent through words such as [Hamlet's] "favour," "a fashion," "blood," or the long-winded "youth of primy nature,/ Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,/ The perfume and suppliance of a minute,/ No more." Ophelia wonders at Laetes' suggestion, "No more but so?" These words evoke from Laertes, "Think it no more." Expectedly, this is followed by a 34-line expansion of the point he planned to make. Overall, the exchange between the brother and sister contains a bagful of brotherly worry and in return only a little of sisterly curiosity about what is sought to be conveyed. Finally, the sister has got back to the instructing brother with an unnerving reversion: Laertes should "reck" "his own rede," meaning "You had better mind your own business." On the defensive, Laertes concludes with a half-sentence: "O, fear me not" (Hoy, I.iii. 1-52).

The irony built up by such an unequal confrontation lies in Laertes' verbal bombast that is rendered ineffective by a woman's unintended counter-attack. The effect is intensified further when Ophelia reassures Laertes of her loyalty to the family and his diktat that is "in my memory locked/ And you yourself shall keep the key of it" (I.iii. 85-6). Are these words to be taken at face value?[2] Or conversely, should we see them in their linkage with the harassed mental state Ophelia finds herself in? The metaphor of 'lock' brings out Ophelia's resistance to authority rather than a passive acceptance of the patriarchal value system.

Later in the play, Ophelia senses the logic of Polonius who asks her to reveal her encounter with Hamlet. Polonius asks Ophelia, "What said he?" In response, she gives a graphic report:

> He took me by the wrist, and held me hard
> Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
> And with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
> He falls to such perusal of my face
> As 'a would draw it. Long stayed he so.

Ophelia seems to live the part she played in this confrontation. She makes an effort to know Hamlet's intent in grabbing her hand and looking at her face. Mark that the act of perusal is reversed, it is Ophelia who is reading his gesture now. She is perhaps awaiting an intimate contact which is not forthcoming. Has Ophelia gone back to the moment she faced Hamlet or is melodramatic in the account since Polonius is hearing her? Is she entirely unaware that both brother and father wish her to snap ties

[2] Ophelia is interpreted in this manner by a number of contemporary feminist scholars, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar come to mind. The argument doesn't take note of the *woman*-Ophelia who has her own energy-driven ways of tackling challenges from a male-dominated world. Ranjini Philip's view is that "Ophelia's story is one of nobility and heroism, of self-awareness and self-integration" (252). Both "nobility" and "heroism" are value-laden words that denote biases of a given world. In making demands that bind women to particular norms, "nobility" takes on itself the burden of supporting a particular interest in society.

with Hamlet? If not, she may be appropriately editing the description to meet the needs, her own and those of the family. That this may indeed be case is borne out by we hear her say further:

> At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
> And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
> He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
> As it did seem to shatter all his bulk,
> And end his being.

This is more of a comment than description, involving a bit of playing to the gallery, as it were. To an extent, Ophelia is used as a device (by the dramatist) accounting the movements of Hamlet in precise details for Polonius's envisioning. We note that Ophelia is more alert and comprehending than Laertes and Polonius. Vis-a-vis Hamlet, too, Ophelia has shown a critical eye – he went his "way without his eyes, " (II.i. 99) whereas she was stable enough to articulate her impression. The relative stability of temperament in Ophelia is further affirmed when she is made a pawn in the political power-game that King Claudius, Hamlet, Polonius, Gertrude and Laertes play. This is the time for Ophelia to show her mettle. At once, she is at war with an intrusive brother-father duo and Gertrude who becomes active to preserve her son. Add to this the fact that Hamlet whom she liked began to hate her with the turn of events. Still more traumatic is her gradual loss of self-esteem. These combine to put unbearable pressure on mental resources; she faces complete isolation in the world she inhabits as well as suffers alienation from self. Her eventual breaking apart (this is termed madness by most others in the play), however, takes her to nature where she finds an occasion to follow rhythms associated with celebration of senses and pleasures of fantasy. For her the human-social world is significantly replaced by trees, flowers, water. Contrast this with Hamlet's fears of the unknown, Claudius's obsession with sticking to uncertain political success or Horatio's ideal of philosophical balance in a world gone "out of joint." Ophelia shares the confusion and loss of centre with Gertrude; the latter has seldom been at peace with herself, and has seldom located a point to call her own. Still, whereas Gertrude allowed herself to be embroiled in pursuits of comfort and privilege, Ophelia has lived and died alone.

If Ophelia is a pawn for the male characters to pursue their selfish motives, so is Desdemona in *Othello*. If Ophelia went mad and committed suicide, Desdemona was smothered by a jealous husband. Their plights are intertwined as they are both victims of false accusations by their lover/husband–they are pursued in love only to be abandoned later. Their sin is that they dared to love. When Othello asks Desdemona to think of her sins before killing her, Desdemona immediately responds, "They are loves I bear to you" (5.2.49). Desdemona like Ophelia symbolises innocence and purity, concretised in her fair skin and appearance. Othello refers to her white skin in " I'll not shed her blood,/ Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,/And smooth as monumental alabaster." (5.2.3-4).We note a distinct female construct here about young women beautiful even in death. Criminality is problematically eroticised in her death scene. Just as he is about to kill her, Desdemona invites Othello to her bed, offering complete physical submission to the man. Yet Othello is determined that "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). The man takes it to be his duty to punish the transgressive woman. Yet Othello kisses Desdemona before killing her, and tempted, as if he can't get enough of her, says, "One more, one more./Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee/ And love thee after. One more, and ⟨this⟩ the last." (5.2. 19-21). Desire and murder go hand in hand. The killing of Desdemona is the ultimate act of self control achieved by Othello. It is also about controlling the female body and desire. Othello owned her body in life and controls it even in death.[3] There is a tragic beauty about Desdemona and Ophelia towards the end of the plays, which is also part of male fantasy. Interestingly, when these 'pure' women suffer, Shakespeare makes sure the male protagonists lose their bearings too and meet tragic ends too.

[3] Ophelia's body too becoems a bone of contention among the men in her life. They all lay claim on it. For a detailed discussion, see the chapter 'Ophelia Post Death' in the book.

Hamlet is fatally wounded and Othello commits suicide. In the political world of cunning and deceit these women characters hold little chance of survival.

The character of Cordelia from *King Lear* too fits in with this category of virtuous women who loved unconditionally and suffered silently. So Cordelia says in the very first act, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (1.1.68). Love, suffering and silence become the ideal romantic female prototype in the phallogocentric imagination, completing the romanticisation of these female protagonists.

Cordelia is disowned and banished by the King, because she chooses silence over words and "cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth. /I love your Majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.100-1). Cordelia is duty bound and rational in suggesting that when she marries, her love would be divided between her husband and father. To quote, "When I shall wed,/ That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty" (1.1. 110-113). Maturity and temperance define Cordelia's character. She is also strong-willed, refusing to flatter her father during his love test, even at the cost of losing his favor. However, when faced with the choice between loyalty to England and her devotion to her father, she chooses the filial bond. This decision brands her a traitor in the eyes of the new rulers, as she leads the French army into England. Ultimately, Cordelia is imprisoned for treason and tragically hanged. In the end, the grief-stricken King Lear carries her lifeless body, overcome with sorrow, before succumbing to death himself—a poignant conclusion to their tragic fate.

II

Regan and Goneril in *King Lear* represent the opposite end of the spectrum—strong, deceitful women who rival men in guile and cunning. Both are authoritative and ruthless, working insidiously to eliminate their opponents and advance their self-interest without guilt or hesitation.

They humour their father, King Lear, with false claims of love and devotion, to secure the largest share of his kingdom. However, once they gain control of his lands, they cruelly cast him aside, leaving him to wander the wilderness without shelter or food. Goneril, in particular, bullies and despises her husband, while Regan is a formidable match for her husband.

Having already severed their ties with Lear through marriage, both Goneril and Regan become extensions of their husbands' value systems. In their aristocratic households, they refuse to tolerate Lear's disruptive presence. Goneril rebukes him, saying, "You strike my people, and your disordered rabble / Make servants of their betters." By referring to them as "my people," she distances herself from Lear, asserting her authority and aligning herself with those she believes are being wronged by her father. She complains,

> By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour
> He flashes into one gross crime or other
> That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it.
> His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
> On every trifle. (1.3. 4-8)

Here, the power dynamic is reversed—Goneril, as the keeper of order in the Duke of Albany's house, holds authority, while Lear, now living with her, becomes a dependent. She reprimands him and insists on the dismissal of his unruly knights, prompting Lear's shocked and incredulous response, "Are you our daughter?". As the enforcer of her husband's patriarchal authority, Goneril sees it as her duty to maintain order in the household, ensuring that her palace does not descend into chaos, resembling a tavern or brothel. Mark her words to Lear:

I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright.
As you are old and reverend, should be wise.
Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires,
Men so disordered, so debauched and bold,
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a graced palace. (245-53)

She is insistent on keeping the sanctity of the "graced palace" intact. Lear's curse upon Goneril—"Into her womb convey sterility. / Dry up in her the organs of increase, / And from her derogate body never spring / A babe to honor her" (4.2.292–295)— serves as a pointed reminder that Goneril is childless, which, in turn, allows her to act as an independent and cunning woman. Regan, too, appears to be without children. Neither has been drawn into the logic of motherhood, which often confines women to domestic roles and distances them from political power. In rejecting motherhood, both women adopt traditionally masculine traits, embodying ambition and ruthless pursuit of dominance.

This ambiguity surrounding motherhood extends to Lady Macbeth, as there is little textual evidence to suggest that she and Macbeth have a child. Was this omission deliberate? Did Shakespeare intentionally exclude the aspect of motherhood from his portrayals of strong, morally corrupt women who ultimately meet tragic ends? Their deaths reinforce this pattern—Goneril, after poisoning Regan, takes her own life, much like Lady Macbeth, whose blind ambition leads her into the destructive vortex of political power struggles. Interestingly, in Shakespearean tragedies, central female characters rarely survive the chaos. Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia, Regan, Goneril, and Lady Macbeth all succumb to the odds against them that appear insurmountable.

Lady Macbeth, specifically, operates within the dynamic realm of politics, where the fates of individual leaders—commanders of men—and entire social structures are determined. This sphere is driven by competition, ambition, and the pursuit of power and influence. Politics, in this sense, is defined by a pragmatic quest for success, where the mind harnesses strategic thinking to transform ideas and plans into material force. Moreover, those engaged in political maneuvering must navigate the complexities of the State, the administrative levers and the hegemonic institutions such as religion, societal conventions, and moral principles.[4] The political arena leaves little room for abstract reasoning. Here, ideals and imagination take on concrete, often violent, and antagonistic forms, shaped by competing interests within a given structure. Traditionally dominated by men, politics has historically offered little space for women—unless they align themselves with an existing power center. This reality is crucial to understanding Lady Macbeth's role. She seeks to support her husband as he grapples with the Witches' prophecy and struggles to seize his opportunity. Her determination to prepare him for the decisive moment highlights her calculated engagement with power in a world that would otherwise exclude her. In the context, Macbeth makes his inner thoughts known to Lady Macbeth saying:

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

[4] The point was taken up at length by John Dover Wilson in the Introduction to Macbeth. R.W. Desai, too, pointed out in his essay "Duncan's Duplicity" the clash of interests that resembled modern-day fighting and scheming around issues of individual power.

As Macbeth moves from "no further in this business" to "Not ... so soon, " there is quite a jump backwards in the quoted passage. An astute mind, Macbeth has thrown a hint ("so soon") to be picked up by Lady Macbeth. He knows what is required at the moment but needs moral support as well as an argument to pursue his aim. This is when Lady Macbeth decides to become his philosopher and make explicit the logic working in the deep recesses of his mind. Lady Macbeth also spots in him the lack of will and initiative to intervene, a manly trait. She chooses to pick on these to make her logic work:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? (1.7. 35-41)

The comment works successfully on Macbeth; he acknowledges the point made by her and says: "Prithee, peace:/ I dare do all that may become a man." (45-6). Once Lady Macbeth is able to get the foothold, she makes appropriate use of it and hammers the point effectively:

What beast was't then
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. (1.7. 47-55)

Here "beast," "you," "a man," "more the man," and "unmake you" are but repetitions of what Lady Macbeth has identified in her husband. These are aspects that define him and inspire him to move along the path of success. We also see in Lady Macbeth traits of imagination that remain stuck to the temporal and the immediate; these present a person (in the figure of Lady Macbeth) living in the domain of fact and human practice that influences society's actual layers of violent clash and antagonism.

Thus, we see here the presence of the discourse of primogeniture and its critique. An atmosphere of untold violence, meticulously executed plans and murderous assaults, and the effect they leave on intelligent ambitious minds is the stuff of *Macbeth*. We are dazzled that Lady Macbeth – a woman of focus, courage and determination – wields enough power to impact circumstance, a woman who has mastered better than her male counterparts the earthly logic of success through human effort. That she also suffers intensely and has another side of human longings such as affection and a fulfilled life goes to prove the sense of veracity, and fertility of mind Shakespeare accords to her as a woman.

III

The third female type found in Shakespeare constitutes the young vivacious women, who transgress their socially ordained roles and forego privilege for adventure, and curiosity. They take charge of their lives and set right the circumstances for others too. For instance, Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It* are audacious young women in quest of unknown experiences and escapades. Play is the game and they are bent on creating their lives after their desires. Rosalind right at the outset claims, "What shall be our sport, then?" and instantly proposes "what think you of falling in love?" The game of love as sport will determine the course of the play and these women would not wait for fortune to

favour them for they believe fortune "doth most mistake in her gifts to women" (1.2.24-36) and leaves women wanting for more. They thus plan to redress the defects of fortune and take it in their hands–making their destinies as they like.

Rosalind is banished by Duke Fredrick and must go into exile. But Celia acts courageously in joining her cousin in the forest of Arden. Their love for each other supersedes the love for their fathers, which is why Celia decides to elope with Rosalind. However, between Celia and Rosalind the former is marginalised and often feels Rosalind does not love her "with the full weight that I love thee"(1.2.7). Having prepared to leave the court and seek adventure in the forest of Arden the duo women leave with the fool Touchstone. In entering the forest of Arden the two women are liberated from the clutches of courtly life and operate freely in the natural world. Rosalind assumes a male identity and lives in the forest with Celia, as siblings. The two women replicate a household by buying a cottage and flock in the forest, deciding to lead a country life. Here they make their rules. They are also humanised in the forest, for they must bend before nature and accept its laws.

Pursuit of love is the overarching theme of the play and the two women enter the love game as active participants often leading the men. This is particularly true of Rosalind who as Ganymede offers to cure Orlando of his love-sickness. In the course of the play, Rosalind/Ganymede tries to cure Silvius's lovelorn state by convincing Phoebe of his love. Things are upended as Phoebe falls for Ganymede. One is reminded in the context of Viola in *Twelfth Night* who disguises herself as a man, Cesario, in order to survive in a new place. She falls in love with Duke Orsino whose messenger s/he becomes and convinces Olivia of Duke Orsino's love. Olivia at her end, instead of falling for the Duke, falls in love with the messenger that is Cesario. As is evident, the gender interplay creates comic confusions while keeping the romantic mode intact. As strict societal hierarchies loosen their grip in the forest of Arden, straightjacketed gender identities too become free-flowing attributes, easily worn and discarded, in the forest. Crossdressing thus provides agency to women folk in comedies who navigate society on their own terms. The freedom experienced by both Ganymede and Cesario helps them express their feelings without inhibition and liberates them from the societal ideas associated with the "weaker vessel".

Shakespeare inverts the idea of a weak woman most poignantly in the portrayal of Portia in *Merchant of Venice.* Here, Shakespeare does not stop short at cross dressing. Instead he takes the metaphor forward and offers to the woman protagonist not just a man's clothes but his profession and intellect too. Portia, in Act four appears as a doctor of laws, with a letter of introduction from Dr. Bellario. She defends Antonio and saves him by proving in the court that the bond allows Sherlock to only take a pound of flesh no more, no less and not a drop of blood. This critical acumen wins her applause in a court filled with men. She is unparalleled in her argument and reasoning. Clearly, Shakespeare either completely merged with this character or gave her full scope and liberty to be her best self. The final revelation that it was in fact Portia who fought and won the case against Shylock leaves the male counterparts, Bassanio and Antonio, awestruck. Antonio, being beholden to her, claims, "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living". Portia is a clear sighted, witty, pragmatic woman who at the same time is duty bound to her husband. In many ways she is the ideal female prototype for Shakespeare, one who has courage, intellect and grace.

The comic female protagonist in Shakespeare thus takes on herself the important role of 'self fashioning'[5] and she gives men a run for their money. However, they are able to do so through male disguise. Interestingly, women in the comic world of Shakespeare conform that gender is performative[6]. During Shakespeare's age, young men whose voice would not have cracked often played the part of women. As a result there was a male actor playing the part of a female character who then cross

[5] Stephen Greenblatt argued that both men and women sought to cultivate themselves (self fashioning) on lines accepted as normative and desirable in terms of character and behaviour during the Renaissance. He noted that the ideal type for women was beauty, modesty and purity. Shakespeare it seems gave them intellect too.

[6] The ideas of cross-dressing and performativity cohere with the postmodernist feminist theorist Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and normative heterosexual masculinity.

dressed, acting and dressing like a male. This androgynous male-female identity lends Shakespeare's women characters an edge. They become dynamic entities who could flout rules of patriarchy that would otherwise create problems in the normative social system.

There is another comic type symbolised through Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* where the character retains her wit and determination and yet exercises control. Beatrice disdains men. She enters into a verbal duel with Benedick, but her wit is more than just verbal sparring—it serves as both a defense mechanism and a means of asserting her space within a patriarchal society. Throughout the play, she carefully adheres to social conventions in her interactions with friends, cousins, and uncles. However, when Hero faces disgrace, Beatrice undergoes a striking transformation, momentarily shedding her usual persona and becoming deeply involved in the crisis. Is this shift driven by her obligation to Leonato, her uncle, guardian, and benefactor? That may be part of the reason, yet Beatrice sets herself apart from a mere family member or friend by taking a definitive stance on the gender dynamics that propel the play toward its near-tragic conclusion. Though presented with Shakespeare's characteristic wit, the implications of tragedy in *Much Ado About Nothing* are unsettling.

Sidney Finkelstein described *Much Ado About Nothing* as a "radiantly merry and poetic" comedy in which "Shakespeare gives us the virtuoso verbal duelling of the noblewoman Beatrice, who appears to despise all men, and the young nobleman Benedick, who appears to despise all women" (Finkelstein 134-5). At the same time, however, Finkelstein talks of "an inspired comic twist [in the play], for just as they (Beatrice and Benedick) are at the highpoint of admitting their rapturous love, he says, 'Come, bid me anything for thee,' and she answers, 'Kill Claudio'" (135). Finkelstein categorizing *Much Ado About Nothing* in terms of a comedy prevents him from seeing the full potential of Beatrice who proves to be more than a mere foil to the males including Benedick in the play. Take the example of Benedick confessing his love to Beatrice, "I do nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?" The latter expresses her intent as follows:

> Beatrice: As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I lov'd nothing so well as you; but believe me not, and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin. (4.1. 283-5)

Looked at critically, Beatrice's answer gives out the nature of love as she sees it – it is paradoxical and short-lived, living between uncertainties through clashing negatives such as "strange as the thing I know not," "for me to say I lov'd nothing so well as you" and "believe me not, and yet I lie not." However, this does not take attention away from "I am sorry for my cousin" – the sole point Beatrice is focused on. Also, consider how pragmatically she has used love to gain help for Hero. For her, protection and preservation of a cousin, a woman, is primary, everything else like word-play or fascination for Benedick, comes second.

Hero's trial at the church in full public view has a chilling sense of finality. This is how the case against Hero is presented by the would-be husband:

> Claudio: There, Leonato, take her back again;
> Give not this rotten orange to your friend;
> She is but the sign and semblance of her honour.
> Behold how like a maid she blushes here.
> O, what authority and show of truth
> Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
> Comes not that blood as modest evidence
> To simple virtue? Would you not swear
> All you have that see her, that she were a maid
> By these exterior shows? But she is none:
> She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;
> Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty. (IV.i. 30-41)

Here, our attention is taken by the image of a thing, an article of common use that is being offered for taking and is then returned. Soon enough, "her" becomes an orange meant for consumption by a "friend," signifying alliance between males. Shakespeare exploits the dramatic mode to the full and sets Hero apart as a distinct object on display – one can gaze at it/her to see whether she is honourable, or else "the sign and semblance" of it. The audience in the church as well as the theatre where the play is staged is particularly exhorted to "behold" Hero in the middle of her supposed "maid[enly] ... blushes." Clearly Claudio's terms are less than civilized, indeed violent and insulting. This disagrees with the comic ritualistic mode and exposes the vacuous and hollow upper class driven supposedly by principles of truth, virtue, honour, and modesty – all these find an explicit mention in the speech. Shakespeare conjures up a situation in relation to Hero's marriage that reveals the precarious nature of both love and marriage, hinged as they are on a woman's honour. Shakespeare offers Beatrice and Hero as different two types of women. The former is formidable in her witty skirmishes while the latter is left without agency and suffers at the hands of a suspicious, gullible husband, much like Desdemona. However, since the play is a comedy, the sharp turn it takes in the catching of the culprit restores normalcy and order.