

**القرارات المأساوية للشخصيات النسائية في الدراما
الإليزابيثية واليعقوبية**

**Tragic Decisions of Female Characters in
the Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama**

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الدراما الإليزابيثية واليعقوبية، جيرترود، أوفيليا، دوقة مالفي، وفيتوريا،
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المخلص

تم دراسة الشخصيات الأنثوية في الدراما الإليزابيثية واليعقوبية بعمق في العديد من الدراسات السابقة لإظهار وضع المرأة في المجتمع من خلال دراما في هاتين الحقبتين. تحاول هذه الدراسة فحص القرارات المصيرية والمأساوية التي اتخذتها الشخصيات الأنثوية في مسرح شكسبير في هاملت وماكبث؛ جيرترود، أوفيليا، وليدي ماكبث، وفي مسرح ويبستر في دوقة مالفي؛ دوقة مالفي، والشيطان الأبيض؛ فيتوريا. تقدير تأثير نتائج هذه القرارات على الشخصية نفسها وعلى الشخصيات الأخرى من حولها، سواء كانت هذه القرارات قد اتخذت بإرادة، أو فُرضت عليهن حتى عندما تكون هناك خيارات أخرى، أو أنها قرارات لا مفر منها. يمكن القول بأن بعضهن قررن بإرادتهن على الرغم من معرفتهن بالعواقب الوخيمة، والبعض الآخر، وهن الغالبية، على الرغم من وجود خيارات، فهي مُحددة ومتعلقة بالمجتمع الحقيقي الذي يعيش فيه هؤلاء الشخصيات ولم يتدخل أحد في اتخاذ قراراتهن.

Abstract

The female characters in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama have been examined deeply in several previous studies to show the status of women in society through the drama of these two eras. This study attempts to examine the fateful and tragic decisions made by the female characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) and *Macbeth* (1606); Gertrude, Ophelia, and Lady Macbeth, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613); the Duchess of Malfi, and *The White Devil* (1612); Vittoria. The estimation of the consequences of these decisions effect on the character herself and on other characters around her, whether these decisions have been made up voluntarily, or imposed upon them even when there are other options, or they are unavoidable decisions. It can be said that some of them have been voluntarily decided despite the knowledge of the dire consequences, and others, the majority, despite the existence of options, are deterministic and socio-religious, linked to the real society in which those characters live and nobody interfered in their decision-making.



Introduction

The ancient Greek theatre has its influence on the Elizabethan and Jacobean's theatre particularly in the portraying of women in their drama. The Elizabethan theatre follows simultaneously reflecting the actual status of women and understanding the conceptualization of sex and gender along with the women's role in the Elizabethan and Jacobean's community, and the conventions of the Greeks drama concern the image of women. The drama of the Elizabethan theater tries to identify the role of women in society at that time. Although the Shakespearean epoch was led by a well-educated woman (Queen Elizabeth I), this did not affect a woman's position and rights in society. Women are a property for their fathers and as soon as they got married. They become the property of o their husbands. They could not join in education. Worse than that, the doors of the schools were bearing the words "Males only" (Rackin 7). The primary expectation that women could only fulfill is that they could marry someone with a respectable place in society, vast domains; and various refined titles. The family represented the social heart, sparing a political unit. In addition, women should take care of the family unit and young people, respect their husbands and not take their rights and their own lives into account. Likewise, they are not allowed to engage in any kind of work, and did not have the right to vote. Woman's role in public life was no more than being a wife in the house, and the last position she would attain was becoming a nun in a monastery.

For the Jacobean era, the image, status, and rights of women did not differ much from the Elizabethan era. They had to obey orders, marry, have children, and take care of them and the home. The status of the woman as a creature comes second after the man. All these conditions had their effect on the decisions of women in Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, which is reflected on female characters of the plays of the ages as drama is the mirror of the society at that time onwards. This study investigates the value of the female characters' fatal decisions of Shakespeare's Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Webster's the Duchess of Malfi in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Vittoria in *The White Devil*, and their terrible consequences on the characters themselves and the surrounding characters.



Tragic Decisions of Female Characters in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

Women played significant and heroic roles in Shakespeare's plays, and they probably formed the basis of his playwriting. Female characters range from passionate, ambitious tenderness, weakness and greed women. One noteworthy viewpoint that reflects this elevated confirmation is Shakespeare's ability to construct all forms of characters. He has made several distinct female characters so human and authentic that the reader can individually see quantities of their own identities. Perhaps, reading in the texts of that theater reveals the uncovered vision of Shakespeare in portraying the role of women and its importance in that era. Crawford claims:

It has become quite difficult for everyone to perform, read, teach or study Shakespeare without an awareness of gender issues; this will prove to be a permanent and positive change in attitude to the plays and their extraordinarily rich afterlife in international culture, as feminist studies have contributed to the now widely accepted view that works of art should be treated within a social frame of reference. (227)

Women themselves have their influence on distinct individuals and their inspiration or aspect is often disparaged. Women have reliably had critical portrayals in Shakespearean plays, including the main character now and then. They have been reliably put in testing conditions regardless of whether they establish the primary clashes and foundation of the plays, or raise interesting good and social inquiries (Rackin 49-50).

Shakespeare's new model of women is evident in his famous theatrical work *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, two feminist models are presented; first is Gertrude the Queen, Hamlet's mother and the wife of the new king who killed his brother to seize the throne, according to the narration of the ghost that appeared to Hamlet at the beginning of the play. By tradition, critics have despised Gertrude as a silly woman and weak-willed who definitely postured certain problems (Klett 130). Gertrude, after the death of her husband, had two options to make her decision, as a widow either to maintain her son's legacy and his position, or to transport it entirely into the hands of Claudius (Burton 78).

Gertrude decided to marry her husband's brother, Claudius and she explained this as preserving the kingdom, which put it in the circle of suspicion of her involvement in the crime of killing her first husband at least in the eyes of Hamlet, her son. However, according to some critics, she was presented as a superficial and erotic figure and her reactions did not involve any intellectual depth, loyalty, or even respect for her age, for



after the death of her husband in a mysterious way, she surrounded her head with flowers, dressed and danced as young girls did, and did not wake up the passion of her motherhood sufficiently even when she saw the changes and disturbances her son was going through (Heilbrun 104). But on the contrary, she helped to perpetuate the saying with her son's madness. She says:-

This is mere madness:
And thus awhile the fit will work on him;
Anon, as patient as the female dove,
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping. Act V, Sc. I, 126).

Gertrude's emotions towards her son has been awakened and she started to search for a justification to Hamlet (Findlay 153). His silence would sit drooping only some of the places where her maternity awoke as she did in the scene of Ophelia's death and during a duel "No, no, the drink, the drink,--O my dear Hamlet,--/The drink, the drink! I am poison'd. (Act V, Sc. II, 139). Here, she has changed her decision, but it was too late. Perhaps, this was motivated by what dictated her status as queen by the most. The woman here and her issue as a mother and wife do not produce any kind of new presentation which affirms that her role in society has changed. The case of the woman in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* clarifies that the mother accepts her husband's murderer and even though she becomes his wife in spite of her son's refusal, this is the point that raises the question of whether Shakespeare wanted to defend the woman through Gertrude, but the truth is that he presented an honest picture of what a patriarchal religious community could see in the woman (Whetton 12-13). Despite the decision that she made to remarry her husband's brother, it was not purely voluntary, but rather explained the inability of women to make decisions even if the options were available. In the end, her decision, in which she believed would protect her and her son, led her to her death and the death of her son.

John Webster's plays and his depiction of women in the Jacobean age produced different types of female characters who might be read by critics to some extent as of complex identity. The Duchess in "The Duchess of Malfi", for example, was circulated a little differently from Gertrude. She too had to make her decision out of two options, either to keep her personality and kinship with her two brothers, and her position as a duchess of Malfi, or to sacrifice all these things for her love and marry Antonio. However, the issue here may be somewhat different simply because making the decision and choosing among the presented options appears courageous. Although it appears as suicide of another kind



because she knows its consequences, but it may explain— though implicitly— the writer's desire to inform women that they have an independent decision, especially if this decision is related to their personal lives and emotional relationships. On the one hand, it may also imply the dire consequences of women's decisions against the wishes of her father or two brothers on the other hand. The conflict that the Duchess may suffer in this area is that she is a woman who possesses an illusory power that has no value in the presence of her brother's authority and between her affection as a woman who has the right to love and marry again, which makes her decision difficult. It seems here that she prefers her love and desire to live free to her brothers' disapproval of her second marriage despite her knowledge with the dire consequences that await her and what her two brothers may do with her (Male 62).

As for her behaviour and reaction, when she faces death at the end of the play, there may be a convergence in the decision of the Duchess of Malfi to the decision that Queen Gertrude has made after the murder of her husband. Her choices were to marry the king's brother (the choice of death for the Duchess) instead of taking care of her son Hamlet and searching for her husband's killer and revenge on him. Instead of looking for her husband and children, Queen Gertrude is more interested in looking for a husband. In this behavior, Duchess of Malfi presents more care and in this scene most of her attention and speaking are engaged on Antonio. In addition, when the time of her death has come, she requests Cariola "I pray thee look thou givest my little boy/ Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl/ Say her prayers ere she sleep" (Act IV, Sc. II, 204-206)

On this basis, Queen Gertrude's choice to marry the King is a guarantee of her family's life. Queen Gertrude and the Duchess of Malfi think that this would protect their sons, although the only time the Duchess of Malfi expresses to or about her children is when she utters the last words to her eldest son who leaves with Antonio for Ancona (Act III, Sc. V, 64-66). Even when she shows her the wax painting of Antonio and her children, she did not seem to care about the children as much as she cared about her husband, so that she might not see them in the first place, not because she did not have the tenderness of the mother or that she did not love them, but because the focus of the writer is to highlight her role as a wife and not as a mother (Male 57). Her love and sacrifice for her husband, despite her brothers' opposition to her marriage in general and her marriage to him in particular, is on the grounds that it is not of her social level. So, her behavior as a mother towards her children is not a point of weakness in her, but a source of strength, because she knows with certainty that preserving her husband means preserving her children (Liebler 271).

Given her the role as an independent ruler, the Duchess of Malfi needs also to be observed as a political figure. Critics have hardly measured



the Duchess of Malfi as a political personality in spite of the fact that she rules Malfi as Regent for her son, the minor inheritor to the Duke of Malfi, her dead husband (Jankowski 232). However, the image of the woman may differ slightly in the drama of the Jacobean era, Webster, for example, draws an almost striking picture of the character of the Duchess of Malfi as a widowed woman and in a position of authority, but she is nevertheless subject to the authority of her brothers. This may comprehend her as a strong woman, the ability of women to make their decision, as an example of free a woman, example of other women to trace her in spite of the any consequences.

In contrast to this image of women, which is presented to be completely different is Ophelia's image in Shakespeare's "Hamlet". Ophelia has no options to make her decision. She has been depicted as an absent voice of women, she has no free will. She tells King Claudius "[...] Lord, we know what we are, but know not/what we may be. God be at your table!" (Act IV, Sc.V, 102). This statement shows that Ophelia wants to deliver a message that is not only about her lack of knowledge of her fate and what awaits her in the future, but also of showing that she does not possess her own decision and that she is not free in what she wants and what she does (Kadish 1). She is dominated by her father and brother, for she is a good, innocent person who was placed in a stormy and turbulent environment, which is the environment of the royal palace in Denmark. Ophelia, who falls in love with Prince Hamlet, and appears to be a victim of the other characters because of her inability to take a decision in her life, Hamlet uses her as a tool in his revenge plan against his uncle Claudius (Bloom 408-409). When her father warns her of the consequences of continuing her emotional relationship with Hamlet, he at the same time confiscates her decision and feelings. Accordingly, her weakness and hesitation is bluntly revealed, which, is a natural thing in her society. In the murder of her father, and her resort to insanity is the only kind of decision she takes to escape from this feeling of guilt, or in its deepest sense it could be considered as a protest against the patriarchal community (Mohamed 18).

Ophelia is represented in *Hamlet* a state of idealism, serenity and beauty, in an atmosphere of conflict, and intrigue. She achieves a balance for the theatrical template, and forms one of the multiple images of women in Shakespeare's works, confirming that women resemble life in their purity, stubbornness, cunning, devotion, their love, and their hate. Here, the prevailing social laws in her view of social relations, as well as the position of women in society, deny Ophelia the right to choose and marry Hamlet. Ophelia's character influenced the world of theatrical literature. She is the gentle character who tries to keep her lover Hamlet from falling into the focus of revenge with what she possesses of love, to fly with his



heart towards love and longing instead of going on the path of revenge, but she could not influence her lover who is "cruel" and this appears through Hamlet's saying, "To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell"(Act III. Sc. I, 133). This is the bulk of what a woman can do if she wants to live purely (Guilfoyle 7). The implication here is that Shakespeare reflects the trauma that Hamlet suffers from as a result of his mother's decision of remarriage to his uncle immediately after his father's murder which affects him to further extent and awaken his suspicions (Safaei 187). Hamlet's cruelty, which overshadowed Ophelia's tenderness and unbridled desire to preserve her love, makes her drown in obsessions of insanity to finally throw herself into a lake where she chooses her decision which is her only independent decision made by her to commit suicide. More importantly, argues that the name of Ophelia means 'helper' (311), that is why she has been exploited as a pawn. Ophelia allows her father Polonius and the king Claudius to test whether love is the source of Hamlet's madness in a realistic way (Findlay 311). Similarly, as a means of support for Hamlet, Gertrude gives her more agency "I hope your virtues / May bring him to his wonted ways again / To both your honors"(Act III, Sc. I, 62).

The significance of this point stems from the fact that some critics categorize Shakespeare as a noble supporter of the feminist emancipation movement. In contrast to these claims, what Shakespeare wrote was to satisfy men, as some critics say. But there is a major misunderstanding in what is said about him in favor of gender equality. What prompted others to describe Shakespeare as an equal advocate is his ability to draw characters, penetrate their environments, and depict their psychological states in a patriarchal society as a great writer (Shakespeare's Women, Liz Lewis). Indeed, despite the variety of personalities in the topics he portrayed, Shakespeare presented a picture of women in his literature, since he saw them as a permanent source of evils and sins, which was a reflection of the biblical source that notes Adam's first sin based on a solely female motive (Findlay 254). At the time of Shakespeare, the sexist nature of society has been criticized by overthrowing the roles of gender, that can be noted when sometimes the female characters are depicted stronger and more courageous than man himself.

Lady Macbeth, for example, has been portrayed to be not only bolder than Macbeth, but also the evoker or the supporter for him, Alfar suggests that "In this sense Lady Macbeth confirms— as both witness and support—the masculinist violence and power her husband values, performs as warrior and desires in his fantasy of kinship"(115-116). She is the one who devises the plan to kill king Duncan, who rectifies the situation in order not to reveal the plan, and the one who puts daggers and smears it with blood so that the guards are accused of murder. So, she is not only bold in killing,



but in planning, camouflaging, and supporting her husband. By doing so, she steps outside her realm and thus she does not only have her own decision, but also that of her husband. In that context, it is widely regarded that the main reason for the strength of female characters in Shakespeare is that the strange female character that dominated the era in which Shakespeare lived and defined the image of women is the character of Queen Elizabeth I (Vanhoutte 13). This woman is the most important female character in the era of Shakespeare and when comparing the characteristics of famous women in Shakespeare's drama with the character of Queen Elizabeth, the character of Elizabeth is the source of the great inspiration for Shakespeare in drawing his strong female characters in his great plays (Auerbach 200). In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's tampering with gender roles appears to present a new image away from the existing one, where women appear less emotional than men. Lady Macbeth, for example, who lives a struggle between the infanticide of the female within her in favor of the lust for domination and the masculine power within her, is a character that clearly highlights the male prejudice against female figures from the era of Shakespeare until now. Jameson gives the characteristics of Lady Macbeth's personality as:

The grand features of her character are so distinctly and prominently marked, that though acknowledged to be one of the poet's most sublime creations, she has been passed over with comparatively few words: generally speaking, the commentators seem to have considered Lady Macbeth rather with reference to her husband, and as influencing the action of the drama, than as an individual conception of amazing power, poetry, and beauty [...].(361)

In a similar vein, the character of Lady Macbeth has two main lines which led to the choice of her decision. The first is her lack of ability to be a mother and her attempt to kill this desire within her, and the reason may be that she does not try to be a male as much as she tries to avoid the curse of becoming a corrupt mother. The second streak that Shakespeare worked on was her refusal to use the feminine characteristic, due to the fact that she knew the circle within which her female society was framed. "Lady Macbeth, with all her soaring ambition, her vigour of intellect, her subtlety, her courage, and her cruelty—what is she, compared to Richard III" (Jameson 57).

Thus, it would be useful to say that Shakespeare treats women who are in power with distrust. Their morals are questionable, for example, Gertrude's marriage after her husband's murder was just for the sake of staying in power and not losing authority even though that does not satisfy her only son, Hamlet. Likewise, Lady Macbeth incites her husband to murder. These women show a strong desire for power, which resembles



that of men, and sometimes even surpasses it. This is evident in the behavior of Lady Macbeth, as it seems that there is an internal conflict raging over that; she is a female on the one hand who shares with Macbeth for power. Therefore, she abandons some of her innate qualities as a female and is equal to her husband's ambition to love power, but she is almost far beyond him (Klett 133).

Cruelty is the main characteristic of Lady Macbeth, who, as she described to herself, would not mind crushing a baby's head feeding from her breast. If her husband remained in a state of mental strength, she would be able to continue, but what happened to her husband made her feel frustrated, so she preferred death by suicide rather than falling defeated. This is another aspect of her cruelty since Macbeth, when he announced her death, said she died with a violent hand similar to hers. Ambition and strength, two traits in Lady Macbeth's personality, are both masculine traits, but they have combined powerfully in her person, to a greater degree than they did in Macbeth. Building the character in this way, Shakespeare challenges his society's views of masculinity and femininity by presenting a dominant female figure. Desiring to get rid of her femininity, Lady Macbeth was asking to present her womb as a sacrifice for more cruelty and strength. She desires an inner masculine transformation in order to achieve her goals and decisions in making her husband kill the king in greed for the crown, she challenges him to be a man, so he should do a manly act like murder. Macbeth describes it by saying you look like a wild flower, but you have a snake inside.

Thus, it can be said that Lady Macbeth dealt with the prophecy as if it was her own, not her husband's, and it should be fulfilled in any way, even if she exploited her husband and pushed him to commit a crime in order to wear the Crown of Scotland. Thus, Shakespeare shows two different images of two women; the evil develops in a woman's heart with a perverted power, as in the character of Lady Macbeth, and the other is the foundation of evil in a woman through her feeling of weakness and her need for strength to protect herself and her son, as in the character of Gertrude (Sorge 4).

Vittoria Corombona is a Venetian lady who was first married to Camillo, and then to Brachiano. Vittoria, like her brother Flamineo, descends from the honorable Venetian family of Vitelli. The reader comes to know from what Flamineo notes that the family conditions had become bad. She too had to choose her fortune either to stay with her husband who is financially and sexually disabled, or to get a lover or a surrogate husband who meets her financial and sexual requests in addition to the prestigious power and social status. These thoughts prepare the way for her to make her decision, but this time, the condition is different because it is her brother who will help her to take the second decision by getting rid of her



husband and searching for another one. This substitution reflects various interpretations, it may give a society in which respectable women have not operated.

Marriage is the only way for Vittoria to achieve some social status or she tries to live in accordance with the dictates of her own existence, contributing to the degradation of others who are unable to comprehend, understand or accept their deviations from the behavioral patterns required of them. To do this and make a decision to her interest, she had to seek the help of her brother Flamineo, unlike the Duchess of Malfi, who was unable to marry even though she is a widow. But in Vittoria's case, it is somewhat strange that she is already married, nevertheless she wants to change her husband. Accepting this, her brother helps her; however, her brother's help for her is not out of love or recognition of the woman's freedom to choose the husband she loves, but rather out of desire for money and power. Though her decision led her to, her first husband, her brother's tragedies as well as the different types of accusations by most of the characters in the play, but she has made her decision by herself. In an analysis of this issue, Marriott claims that "[...] Vittoria in her antisocial conduct, do not aim to subvert the social order, but seek only self-fulfillment" (77). For her, the price of freedom may be a difficult and costly decision, as she lost her first husband, her brother and her life.

Conclusion

It seems that the playwrights of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras through their drawing of female characters, want to reveal what is going on in their minds of ideas on the one hand and points of view and objection to some of the laws, regulations, customs and traditions prevalent in their time that make women unable to make their decisions of their own free will. On the other hand in Shakespeare's writings, women in particular held a high place, and his female characters were often described as powerful personalities with a will and a considerable capacity to make risky fateful choices and have the ability to challenge and defend themselves to death.

Queen Gertrude's decision in *Hamlet* was not a voluntary decision, but rather an inevitable decision, not optional. She had no other path to take except to marry her murdered husband's brother, and this may be the main reason that led to her and her son's murder, contrary to what she thought. So, the tragic result was not because of her own decision, but rather by obedience to it.

As for the Duchess Malfi, she appears more courageous, noble and sincere in her decision, despite her knowledge of the consequences that await her from her two brothers. As well as to that her decision causes her miseries and the tragedy of her husband and children. However, her decision represents a qualitative leap in the decisions of female characters in the Jacobean era, especially by John Webster, who gave great



importance to the female characters in his plays that no one had given before. Finally, through the decisions of female characters, Shakespeare and Webster might want to present different images of female figures as women in the Elizabethan and Jacobean community on one hand, and to refer to the ability of women to make decisions and adhere to them even if they would lead them to their destruction and the destruction of those around them, on the other hand, but the important thing is that she made her voice being heard and said her word.

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