

The Influence of Shakespearean Tragedies on Contemporary Women

Jianli Qin

Faculty of Philology, Belarusian State University, Minsk, 220002, Belarus

Abstract: *As the greatest playwright in the Renaissance, Shakespeare created a number of masterpieces with perfect ideological and artistic unity, which crossed the temporal gap and regional barriers, shining as a bright pearl in the history of world literature. William Shakespeare's four great tragedies reflect his in-depth thinking about real life. His portrayal of female images in his works has a profound relationship with the era as well as the social and cultural background in which he lives. This paper takes the four female images in the four great tragedies of Shakespeare as the prototype to illustrate the influence of the female images created in that specific era background on contemporary women.*

Keywords: *Shakespeare; Tragedy; Contemporary women*

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare is a well-known writer, playwright and poet in the Renaissance of the 16th century in Europe. His works contain a wide range of social content, which not only reflects the spirit of the times but also shows the glory of humanism.^[1] He had an even higher achievement in writing tragedies. Shakespeare's experience gradually increased in his middle age, and had more understanding of life. The fickleness of the world as well as the joys and sorrows of life made Shakespeare more mature with profound thinking. In the 7-8 years around 1601, Shakespeare concentrated on writing a number of tragedies, such as Hamlet (1601), Othello (1604), King Lear (1605), Macbeth (1606)^[2], Timon of Athens (1605-1608), etc., among which the first four are the most famous, known as Shakespeare's "four great tragedies". These tragedies shaped many characters, including positive characters, which led the development of humanism, and also some "evil" characters with various problems and contradictions, which revealed the crimes in the society at that time, and aroused in-depth thinking on some practical problems. One of the highlights of Shakespearean plays is the portrayal of female images.

Shakespeare's literary works are the classics of realism, he started from real life, with extraordinary artistic overview, a comprehensive and profound reflection of the times and the essence of society. This paper will take the female representative characters in Shakespeare's tragedies as the objects, based on their roles in the plays, and combine them with relevant contemporary Western literary theories. Through comparative analysis, we find that, in addition to the traditional analysis of character factors, the tragic fate of the female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies is not only the result of the character defects of the male and female protagonists in the plays, but also a gender tragedy caused by the contradiction between the gender characteristics given by society and culture and the desire of women for equality, freedom and spiritual independence.

2. Female Images in Shakespearean Tragedies

2.1. Desdemona

Desdemona, the heroine in Othello, is a sacrifice under the men's view of chastity. In the Renaissance, the ideology of male chauvinism had always occupied a dominant position, and the profound social contradictions in the Renaissance were also fully reflected in the depiction of female characters in Shakespeare's works. Women at that time must abide by secular moral norms and could never break the shackles of chastity. The hero of the play Othello is an honest and simple man. He is a brave general and falls in love with Desdemona, a lady from a noble family. Desdemona defies her father without caring about the worldly concepts, giving up her rich life and chose to marry Othello privately. As a result, she was abandoned by his father. However, Othello was provoked by other people,

mistakenly believing that Desdemona was a prostitute, and then killed his innocent wife, resulting in tragedy of Desdemona and himself.^[3]

The male chauvinism reflected in Othello, with patriarchy and the authority of husband being its core, has its deep social roots. In this tragedy, the characters are vivid, and Desdemona is chaste, weak and obedient. She is in persistent pursuit of love but is suspected by her beloved husband. She bravely decides on her own marriage, which makes her father Brabantio furious, since he believes that his daughter must be bewitched to marry a man like Othello. In Brabantio's mind, her daughter has always been perfect, clever, pure and obedient, and this kind of obedience is manifested in Desdemona's inability to choose her husband according to her own will, whether they really love each other or not. In the patriarchal society, Desdemona must obey her father for everything in her life, otherwise she is regarded to be degenerate and disrespectful. Desdemona worships Othello's experience and sympathizes with his sufferings. She never doubts Othello with loyalty. After marriage, she is dependent on her husband. Even when Othello wants to kill her, Desdemona only begs for mercy, without arguing and fighting, which fully reflects that she is a weak woman who needs to be protected. Othello's ruthless suffocation of his wife in bed is a thorough manifestation of male chauvinism. A wife must be chaste, which is the bottom line that cannot be touched. This view of chastity defines women's gender identity, which deprives women of their subjectivity.

2.2. *Ophelia*

In the tragedy of Hamlet, Ophelia, who is Hamlet's lover, is one of the most beautiful and graceful female representatives in Shakespeare's works.^[4] Like Desdemona, she is also a chaste, kind-hearted and loyal woman. In this tragedy, it can be found the great influence of male chauvinism on the shaping of female images. Ophelia is an innocent and romantic girl with beauty and a warm heart. However, as a girl from a typical feudal aristocratic family, she is deeply influenced by the feudal society. She is conservative and weak, gentle in personality, simple in experience, and always considers her family, father and brother as the center. In her love with Hamlet, she encounters the obstruction of her father and brother, and the gap in political status makes it impossible for her and Hamlet to be together. Finally, she becomes a victim of the court struggle. Ophelia tries to be a good daughter and lover, but she is always controlled by her father, brother and husband. In real life, she is more like a doll or puppet controlled by the men around her. She is weak and powerless to fight, and she has no way to break from the shackle and finally dies. Ophelia is absolutely obedient to her father and brother and loyal to love. She can neither disobey her father and brother, nor can she give up her love. She struggles in her heart, which makes her feel painful and confused. Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia actually implies his unfair value judgment on women, holding that women are generally powerless and weak, and have to rely on men for survival, thus highlighting the strength of men, and believing that men are the subject that creates and promotes the development of history. Despite that Ophelia is in deep love with Hamlet, as part of Hamlet's crazy revenge plan, she is mercilessly abandoned and eventually drowned. Desdemona and Ophelia are pure, obedient and kind. Both of them are required by their husbands to be chaste. The so-called chastity is a death warrant for Desdemona, who died in vain at her husband's hands just because her husband is bewitched and provoked by others. As for Ophelia, she also pays her precious life for the so-called chastity. Shakespeare stands on the gender position of men, concealing the true thoughts and feelings of women in his works, but portraying women as objects with the function of pleasing men. Women's feelings are ignored, and their behavior is strictly bound by traditional moral norms, which ultimately leads to their tragic fate of being victims of the society.

The reason why Hamlet is the first of Shakespeare's four great tragedies lies not only in the tragic ending of the work, but also in the heavy reflections the work brings to people, reflections on Hamlet's fate and reflections on the social background of the Renaissance period at that time. The final ending of the main character Hamlet, on the other hand, is the inevitable trend of the development of the whole era, and his personal sacrifice is also the final ending of the development of the work. In a way, tragedy is not misfortune, but beauty in a sense.

2.3. *Lady Macbeth*

In the tragedy of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is a negative female character. As Macbeth's wife, the cruel Lady Macbeth is ambitious, cruel and unscrupulous in order to help Macbeth ascend the throne. She always acts as an instigator in the process of her husband's killing and usurping the throne.^[4]

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies. It mainly tells the story of Macbeth, the

cousin of King Duncan of Scotland, who returns triumphantly from the battlefield, is bewitched and kills the king under the instigation of his wife, but is finally doomed. In this tragedy, the female characters are completely demonized and smeared. The three witches met by Macbeth on his way back from meritorious service said weirdly, "I fear thy nature; it is too full o'the milk of human kindness", which bewitches Macbeth and gradually leads him to the wrong way of regicide. Macbeth's is indecisive and lacks courage, while Lady Macbeth is firm and calm, ruthless, good at balancing benefits and risks and shifting the blame on others. She is defined as a representative of "evil". Lady Macbeth is different from many other female characters in Shakespeare's works, in that she tries all means to achieve her goal and misleads her husband with words and actions, making Macbeth go astray. In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a cruel and tyrannical person, who should afford all blames and sins of Macbeth. It seems that it is Lady Macbeth who causes the bad consequences. Finally, Lady Macbeth died of mental disorder, but Macbeth does not feel sad, showing that what Macbeth really cares is only power and honor.

2.4. Goneril and Reagan

King Lear tells the story of Lear, the king of ancient Britain, who is in his twilight years, distributes his wealth and land to his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, according to their "declaration of love", which results in his homeless and miserable life, living in the wilderness with beggars, and finally losing his beloved daughter.^[5] Goneril and Reagan are villains in King Lear. Their rebellious spirit is unacceptable in the era of male chauvinism at that time. The two sisters are princesses and well-educated, however, Shakespeare did not depict any of their innocence and beauty, but focused on how the two sisters evict their old father out of the house and how they fight and persecute each other. In Shakespeare's depiction, they are immoral, ignorant, shameless, greedy, tyrannical, ignorant, cunning and licentious, which completely demonizes the two sisters, while in the meantime implies the absolute authority of men in the society at that time. Once women violate the rules and requirements of men, they would be demonized, without any tolerance and sympathy.^[6]

3. Analysis of the influence of Shakespeare's tragedies on contemporary women

From the various female images in Shakespearean works, it can be seen that women are always in an "embarrassing" situation. However, it is not difficult to find that Shakespeare is a writer who respected and praised women.^[7] Even when depicting those evil female characters, he often tried to restore the tragic truth brought by the fetters of history and culture on their gender, which may be the reason why even evil female images are often glowing and eye-catching in Shakespearean plays. Shakespearean tragedies make women's gender characteristics unfamiliarly displayed in front of the audience, which instead can attract the attention of the audience.^[8] In the portrayal of female characters, Shakespeare broke away from the influence of feudal churches and various feudal concepts, creating a new realm of describing women. He emphasized the wisdom and strength of women, advocated that women should have the right to pursue wealth and happiness, opposed the Catholic abstinence thought and feudal oppression with "fraternity", and resisted the medieval hierarchy with praise for love, friendship and personal morality. Women characters stand out from the stereotyped image and become vivid with life.^[9]

Over a long time, the lifestyle, values and aesthetic orientation of the Chinese people have changed. However, their expectations for love and the demands for female beauty have not changed. In the modern society where feminism is surging, understanding the female images in great works of Shakespeare, the literary giant, can arouse in-depth reflection for modern people, thus women can no longer be regarded, commented and depicted as cultural objects, and can truly move towards "human freedom".^[10]

As a literary giant in the Renaissance, William Shakespeare's four tragedies reflect his deep thinking about real life.^[11] His portrayal of female images in his works has a profound connection with his time and social and cultural background. Based on the four female images in Shakespeare's four major tragedies, this paper expounds that Shakespeare's male chauvinism influenced the shaping of female characters in his tragic creation under the specific background of that time, and points out that Shakespeare's male chauvinism is mainly reflected in the position, character, life and destiny of women in his works.^[12] Looking at the various stereotyped female images in Shakespeare's works, their character, life, status and destiny are deeply influenced by Shakespeare's patriarchal consciousness. In his tragedy, most of the praised women are gentle, kind, chaste, docile, beautiful and subservient to

men. However, society is still dominated by men, and women can only live by men. It is precisely because of the particularity of Shakespeare's historical era that his tragic works have a unique male chauvinistic perspective. Under this background, naturally, the construction of the relationship and status between men and women in the works shows Shakespeare's male chauvinism perspective. In the male-centered world, through the description of various female images, we can also get a clearer glimpse of the current social situation and attitudes towards women at that time.^[13]

4. Conclusion

In summary, women are always in an "embarrassing" situation in Shakespeare's tragedies, but it is easy to see that Shakespeare is a writer who respects and celebrates women, and even when he reproduces those evil female characters, he tries to restore the truth of the tragedies caused by the historical and cultural constraints on their gender. This may explain why even the evil female characters are often brilliant and attention-grabbing in Shakespeare's plays, because Shakespeare makes the social and gender characteristics of women unfamiliar to the audience through tragedy, which attracts the attention of the audience and critics. This is perhaps what Adorno called the critical appeal of "negative art" to reality.^[14] In the cultural context of the time, perhaps the hypothesis of "character is destiny" should be replaced by the proposition of "gender is destiny". In general, the female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies, based on their roles and destinies and their roles in the tragedies, can be distilled into a set of behind-the-scenes power women who transcend traditional gender boundaries. Combining textual empirical evidence and relevant contemporary Western literary theories, through comparative analysis we find that, in addition to the character factor on traditional analysis, the tragic fate of the female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies is not only the result of the character defects of the male and female protagonists in the plays, but also a gender tragedy caused by the contradiction between the gender characteristics given by society and culture and women's desire for equality, freedom and spiritual antagonism, and it can be said that the complex Renaissance It can be said that the complex concept of gender in the Renaissance is the source of contemporary gender theory. The important reasons for the tragedy are related to the female gender identity dominated by Phyllocentrism, especially closely linked to the misalignment and imbalance of female gender identity. It is evident that women are not born, women are women in a particular culture.

References

- [1] Dusinberre J. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*[M]. Springer, 1996.
- [2] Labriola A C. *The Eschatology of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies: Ultimate Reality and Meaning in Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth* [J]. *Ultimate reality and meaning*, 2000, 23(4): 319-338.
- [3] Garner S N. *Shakespeare's Desdemona*[J]. *Shakespeare Studies*, 1976, 9: 233.
- [4] Moonik M M, Mogeia T, Sabudu D. *The influence of lady macbeth to macbeth downfall in shakespeare's Macbeth* [J]. *Journal of English Culture, Language, Literature and Education*, 2020, 8(2): 97-113.
- [5] Chambers N J. *King Lear: Silence and the Leafage of Language*[M]//Volume 16, Tome II: Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs. Routledge, 2016: 73-80..
- [6] Gillen Katherine. *Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies: Violence in the Early Modern Home*. By Emma, Whipday [J]. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2022,71(2).
- [7] Wang Gang, Yu Meina. *The dissolution and regeneration of women's drawing power and the anxiety of kingship-a reinterpretation of Shakespeare's late legendary play The Story of Winter* [J]. *Journal of Tangshan Normal University*, 2022,44(02):52-56+141.
- [8] Zhang Hao. *Cross-border women-cultural interpretation of gender characteristics of Shakespeare's tragic characters* [J]. *Drama Art*, 2019 (02): 84-96.
- [9] Zhang Hui. *Different women, same destiny-on Shakespeare's tragedy Titus Antelo Gus*[J]. *World Literature Review (Higher Education Edition)*, 2015(02):141-144.
- [10] Gillen Katherine. *Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies: Violence in the Early Modern Home*. By Emma, Whipday [J]. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2022,71(2).
- [11] Wolfgang William Floyd. *Grassroots Shakespeare: "I love Shakespeare, and I live here": Amateur Shakespeare Performance in American Communities*[J]. *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 2022,39(3).
- [12] Nasaybah W. Awajan. *Terry Pratchett's Rewriting of Shakespeare's Witches in Wyrd Sisters*[J]. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2022,12(3).
- [13] Holland Peter. *King Lear 'After' Auschwitz: Shakespeare, Appropriation and Theatres of Catastrophe in Post-War British Drama by Richard Ashby (review)*[J]. *Comparative Drama*,

2022,55(4).

[14] Clare Janet. *The Italian World of English Renaissance Drama: Cultural Exchange and Intertextuality* by Michele Marrapodi. *Italian Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* by Michele Marrapodi, Giorgio Melchiori (review)[J]. *Modern Language Review*, 2022,96(1).