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Readings in Shakespeare

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Honors Option Essay

## Lady Macbeth and Desdemona: A Glimpse into the Lives of Elizabethan Women

### I.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean eras were periods of increasing intellectual openness in which the education of women was slowly becoming more common. Queen Elizabeth I, the supreme monarch of the British Empire as well as a wildly successful female ruler, had a great impact on this change. The intelligence and confidence given to women by education, however, contradicted the existing feminine ideal; this ideal favored a woman who was the picture of “chastity, silence, and obedience” (Hall 263). The perfect woman was to be modest in all of her movements, silent when in the presence of men, and constantly obedient to her husband and father. This Elizabethan feminine ideal was greatly influenced by the long-held belief that women were physically and emotionally weaker than men. Chastity, silence, and obedience—the holy trinity of womanhood—required women to be subservient to their male counterparts. A rejection of any one of these three traits signaled something unnatural and suggested a “cataclysmic destruction of divinely inspired social order” (Hall 263). According to many Renaissance texts, women were expected to adhere to these virtues faithfully, but one can wonder whether the expectations of women truthfully reflected their actual behavior. After the analysis of some of Shakespeare’s female characters, specifically Desdemona and Lady

Macbeth, one would be inclined to propose that women did not always conform to the society's expectations. To further explain this proposal, let's take a closer look at the Elizabethan ideal...

During Elizabethan and Jacobean times, English women found themselves within a society that represented itself as patriarchal. When a girl was born, she was legally the property of her father; and once she was old enough to marry, ownership of her body was transferred to her husband. A woman had "no independent legal or economic status...and in theory women could own neither property nor themselves" (Hall 263). The ownership of women by men significantly decreased the amount of power that a woman could yield within her marriage. At this time, the ideal relationship between a husband and wife was often compared to "the relationship between the king and his subjects" (Hall 278). The husband was the ruler while his wife played the part of loyal servant. The idea that men should hold all the power in a marriage finds its roots in Biblical scripture and is transcribed in an Elizabethan text called *Counsel to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction*. In this text, the author writes,

But each must keep their place, their order, and heavenly polity, whereto God hath called them. The husband is made the head, and the wife resembled to the body: may the head of a body (natural) be turned downward? [...] Must there not be some subjection? Can all in a nation be kings? (Hall 279)

This passage reinforces the husband's role of leader and his natural duty to control his wife. According to this writing, God had chosen husbands to be the spouse to be in charge, and God's will should not be ignored. Males were to be the "heads" that commanded the womanly "bodies". This head and body metaphor implies that a wife is required to obey any command her husband gives. Texts like *Counsel to the Husband* show how the Bible was used to encourage women to maintain persistent obedience.

Closely tied to the idea that women must be consistently obedient is the belief that women are naturally weak, in mind as well as body. The frailty of the female mind in particular is referenced in Juan Luis Vives' *Instruction of a Christian Woman* when he explains why women shouldn't be allowed to choose their own husbands:

...it becometh not a maid to talk, where her father and mother be in communication about her marriage: but to leave all that care and charge wholly unto them which love her as well as her self doth. And let her think that her father and mother will provide no less diligently for her, than she would for herself: but much better, by the reason they have more experience and wisdom. (Hall 272)

Vives goes on to write that women allowed to choose their own husbands may select, "vicious and filthy men, and drunkards, and brawlers, and dawish, and brainless, cruel and murderers" (Hall 273). Because of this possibility, Vives believes a bride's parents will see a man for what he truly is and will be ruled by their "experience and wisdom" and not their personal feelings. In his writing, Vives implies that women are too emotional to make rational decisions, and they should leave important matters to their superiors. Because of women's zealous passions, Vives, along with the majority of Elizabethan popular culture, thought women to be emotionally inferior to men (Hall 265). Unfortunately, during this time, a woman's inferiority was believed to exist far beyond her emotional state. It was also commonly understood that women were "provoked to misbehavior by their inferior female bodies, and made proper subjects only through the loving control of fathers and husbands" (Hall 263). Women were considered biologically inferior to men and, being the weaker sex, more prone to having "powerful, potentially disruptive sexuality" (Hall 265). To the Elizabethan mind, uncontrolled passion and love, coupled with weakened bodies unfit to resist temptation, made it extremely difficult for women to resist

promiscuity. Because women were so easily tempted, their chastity was often brought into question.

At this time, chastity was considered the cornerstone of marriage; a woman's entire reputation was based upon her sexual purity. And because a woman's honor reflected that of her family and husband, chastity was of the upmost importance (Hall 264). Adultery was the gravest act a woman could commit; it was considered the ultimate betrayal and "a crime against God and the state" (Hall 264). According to majority opinion, the simplest way to maintain a woman's chastity was for her to be obedient in regards to "speech, movement, and sexuality" (Hall 266). The ideal woman was to be quiet in speech and movement and modest in her sexuality. In *The Book of the Courtier*, Castiglione describes the balance of speech that the ideal gentlewoman had to maintain:

I say that for her that liveth in Court...Accompanying with sober and quiet manners and with the honesty that must always be a stay to her deeds, a ready liveliness of wit, whereby she may declare herself far wide from all dullness: but with such a kind of goodness, that she may be esteemed no less chaste, wise, and courteous...Neither ought she again...speak words of dishonesty, nor use a certain familiarity without measure and bridle, and fashions to make men believe that of her, that perhaps is not: but being present at such kind of talk, she ought to give the hearing with a little blushing and shamefastness. (Hall 270)

According to Castiglione, the ideal woman had a quiet and honest manner that preserved her chastity, while she simultaneously maintained witty and interesting speech. This perfect woman couldn't talk too much or too informally; if she did, others might think her forward and wanton. She had to be quiet, but not dull; interesting, but not forward. These impossible standards trapped

women between two opposing modes of speech, forcing them to try to maintain a balance. If either quality was too extreme, then a women's chastity or desirability was brought into question. It was an impossible expectation to achieve.

Caught in the tight embrace of expectations like obedience, chastity, and silence, women during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras were expected to be meek, silent waifs. After looking closely at the women portrayed in Shakespeare's plays, however, we see an entirely different picture. Contrary to the feminine ideal, many of Shakespeare's female characters have strong, intelligent, and bold traits. This Shakespearean portrait of a more complex Elizabethan woman is clearly painted in two of his most contrasting characters, Lady Macbeth and Desdemona. Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* displays intense aggression, especially toward her husband, while Desdemona, in *Othello*, shows her husband nothing but obedience, but displays immense strength of character. Despite their vast personality differences, both women and their multi-faceted interior lives challenge the Elizabethan and Jacobean ideal, and offer an insight into the reality of the women of this time.

## II.

When analyzing Lady Macbeth's character, we discover a complex, intelligent woman quite different from the Elizabethan ideal. In the play *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth first enters the stage when she receives a letter from her husband detailing an encounter he had with three witches. In this letter, Macbeth describes a prophecy that predicts his eventual kingship. Immediately after reading his message, Lady Macbeth expresses concerns regarding the strength of her husband's resolve, saying, "...yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full o'th'milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great; art not without ambition, but without

the illness should attend it...” (*Macbeth* 1.5.15-19). Lady Macbeth believes Macbeth is too tender-hearted to act on the prophecy and use violence to gain the throne. The use of the word “milk” to describe Macbeth’s inner being likens him to a woman with child, one that is supposedly too feeble in mind and body to take action. Because Lady Macbeth views Macbeth as being woman-like, she feels it is her duty to be the masculine spouse. She tells the absent Macbeth to, “Hie thee thither, that I may pour my spirits in thine ear, and chastise with the valour of my tongue all that impedes thee from the golden round...” (1.5.24-27). Lady Macbeth decides that if her husband will not seize on this opportunity, then she will be forced to use her powers of persuasion to convince him to act. To aid in her plan, she chooses to reject her femininity and motherly instincts. She verbally asks spirits to “unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty! ... Come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall...” (1.5.40-46). Lady Macbeth seeks to rip away her natural feminine qualities—kindness, gentleness, and changeability—and replace them with constant brutality void of remorse. Only in this state does she believe she can help her husband gain the power he is destined to possess.

To Lady Macbeth’s dismay, her husband does just as she predicted and tries to back out of their plan to murder King Duncan. In response to Macbeth’s change of mind, Lady Macbeth lashes out with aggressive and offensive speech, directly opposing the womanly ideal of silence and obedience. She says, “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” (1.7.49-51). Through her accusations, she labels Macbeth as a coward and questions the authenticity of his manhood. These attacks on Macbeth’s masculinity are repeated when Macbeth returns from killing King Duncan still holding the murder weapons. Lady Macbeth, furious that her husband forgot a crucial part of the plan, grabs the knives and places them next to the king’s night guards herself. On her return, she

mocks Macbeth's feelings of guilt, saying, "My hands are of your colour; but I shame to wear a heart so white" (2.2.64-65). By saying Macbeth has a white heart, Lady Macbeth suggests that her husband is full of inner goodness and innocence. She scorns Macbeth's purity of heart and gives the red blood that adorns their hands a positive connotation. She glories in the violence and bloodshed of the killing and rejects her natural inclination toward guilt.

Though Lady Macbeth repeatedly displays aggressively masculine behaviors to Macbeth, she hides them from everyone else. While in the public sphere, she diligently plays the role of the dutiful wife. Lady Macbeth is well aware of the expectations placed on women of her status and realizes that her violent behavior would be seen a gross infraction in the natural order. In the presence of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth successfully plays the role of gracious hostess. She thanks Duncan for his generosity and offers him anything he could want, saying, "All our service in every point twice done and then done double, were poor and single business to contend against those honours deep and broad, wherewith your majesty loads our house...we rest your hermits" (1.6.15-19). This behavior, contrary to that in her private life, is that of a proper Elizabethan wife that seeks to please her male superiors.

After the initial shock of Duncan's death wears off, Macbeth's guilt disappears and is replaced by paranoia and a ruthless need to kill. Because all of Macbeth's "womanly" traits have disappeared, Lady Macbeth no longer feels like she has to play the role of the masculine spouse. At this point, the guilt she had shoved off to the side comes roaring back with a vengeance, and her mind takes an irreparable toll. The last we see of Lady Macbeth, she is wandering around her chamber trying in vain to wash her hands free of their invisible blood stains. The strong, aggressive woman we met at the beginning of the play is reduced to a mumbling madwoman.

### III.

In direct contrast to Lady Macbeth's aggressive, masculine personality is the fair, sweet Desdemona, the dominant female character in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Our first impression of Desdemona's character is given to the audience by her father. He claims that Othello couldn't possibly have wooed Desdemona without witchcraft or supernatural powers because she is, "A maiden never bold; of spirit so still and quiet that her motion blushed at herself..." (*Othello* 1.3.96-98). Brabantio sees Desdemona as a quiet, shy, little girl, but Othello's account of courtship paints a completely different picture. According to Othello, Desdemona not only choose Othello as her husband without the influence of a spell, she was the one who suggested a relationship in the first place. After hearing Othello's thrilling accounts of dangerous, exotic adventures, Desdemona immediately falls in love him, so much so that she practically proposes. Othello tells the Duke and the other senators that Desdemona, "thanked me, and bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, I should but teach him how to tell my story, and that would woo her" (1.3.165-168). In this line, Desdemona indirectly tells Othello that she would gladly marry him if her were to ask. This blatant declaration is not that of a quiet waif, but one of an independent woman who knows what she wants. Desdemona furthers this bold image when Othello is told that he will be sent to Cyprus. After hearing this sudden news, Desdemona announces that she will be accompanying her husband. Her words are, "...if I be left behind a moth of peace, and he go to the war, the rites for which I love him are bereft me, and I a heavy interim shall support by his dear absence. Let me go with him" (1.3.257-261). Instead of silently standing by while the men make the decisions, Desdemona steps in and makes sure her voice is heard. Not only does she voice her opinion, but the choice she makes involves following her husband into a dangerous

war zone. Only a woman of immense strength of character could even consider such a perilous journey.

Not only is Desdemona bold, she shows unparalleled loyalty. After creating an embarrassing scene while intoxicated, an officer named Cassio has his title taken away. As Cassio is an old friend, Desdemona listens to his petition and honors it by begging her husband to forgive Cassio's wrongs. She repeatedly asks Othello to hear Cassio's case, saying, "Why, then, tomorrow night; or Tuesday morn, on Tuesday noon, or night, on Wednesday morn. I prithee, name the time, but let it not exceed three days" (3.3.66-69). This persistence shows Desdemona's devotion and loyalty to those she holds close and reemphasizes her boldness of speech. Desdemona refuses to be silent when someone she loves is at risk. This loyalty is further shown when Desdemona chooses to stand by her abusive husband. When Othello, because of Iago's manipulation, comes to believe that Desdemona is committing adultery, he verbally assaults his wife and even goes so far as to strike her in public. Throughout this trying time, Desdemona stays true to her marriage. In Act 4, Scene 2, she confides in her attendant Emilia:

Unkindness may do much, and his unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love. I cannot say "whore." It does abhor me now I speak the word; to do the act that might the addition earn not the world's mass of vanity could make me.

Desdemona is willing to stand by her man even if it means she might die. Her undying faithfulness is a tribute to her immense strength. After all of the abuse Othello has inflicted on Desdemona, even after smothering her, she stays true to him to the bitter end. In response to Emilia's question, "Oh, who hath done this deed?" Desdemona's last words are, "Nobody: I myself. Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord. Oh, farewell!" (5.2.128-9). Up to her dying breath, Desdemona makes an effort to preserve her husband's honor.

Even though Desdemona shows herself to be a mature woman in many ways, she is still innocent to the temptations of others. When Emilia helps prepare Desdemona for what will be her last night alive, the two women discuss why wives would be unfaithful to their husbands. During this conversation, Desdemona asks Emilia how some women could possibly cheat on their husbands, asking, “Dost thou in conscience think—tell me—Emilia, that there be women do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?” (4.3.61-63). In her innocence, Desdemona cannot accept that a woman could be vile enough to defile her marriage vows and commit adultery. This quote shows that Desdemona is ignorant of some of the evils of the world.

#### **IV.**

After analysis of Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, we can clearly see that neither of these women followed the mold of typical Elizabethan women. In regards to the feminine ideal of obedience, silence, and chastity, they were all over the charts. Lady Macbeth shoved silence out the window when discussing secret plans in the bedroom, but when it came time to make a public appearance, she played the part of a dutiful wife. Obedience to her husband was quite out of the question, as Lady Macbeth thought herself to be more capable of making the right decisions for their future. Despite her obvious break from the ideal regarding aggression and strength, in the end, she succumbed to a weakness of the body that was so often associated with her sex. As for Desdemona, she loyally obeyed her husband, but she expressly defied her father by marrying without his approval. She repeatedly refused silence to protect her friend, but her chastity was, without question, that of an angel. And, even though women were supposed to be easily tempted because of weakness, she never once felt the urge to cheat on her husband. As can be seen from these two examples, some rules were followed and others were not. Shakespeare

created characters that were complicated people, and his women were no exception. He showed that women could be strong, bold, aggressive, and intensely loyal through Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, and he created these characters by modeling them after the real women that surrounded him daily.

As one might expect, conflict between the ideal and reality is a fairly common phenomenon in human society. Anthropological studies have found that there is often a conflict between ideal culture—what people say should be done—and real culture—people’s actual behavior (Kottak 42). In the Elizabethan and Jacobean times, the culture expected women to be flat and predictable in that they were supposed to be chaste, silent, and obedient. In reality, some individual women contradicted this ideal, proving to be complex, confident, and fearless. Some would like to think we live in a world where everything is black and white, but Shakespeare shows us the truth. He shows us that people, *women*, can’t be shoved into perfect, square boxes, and life is more interesting because of it.

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To understand Shakespeare's characters, actors have long depended on the hints of meaning and shadings of emphasis that he embedded in his verse. They will search for them in vain in the translation: The music and rhythm of iambic pentameter are gone. Gone, too, are the shifts which allow actors to register subtle changes in intimacy between "you" and "thee." Even classical allusions are scrapped. Shakespeare's use of resonance and ambiguity, defining features of his language, is also lost in translation. For example, in Shakespeare's original, when the misanthropic Timon addresses a pair of Shakespearean Continuities is published in honour of the distinguished Shakespeare scholar E.A.J. Honigmann, FBA, Joseph Cowen Professor of English Literature at the University of Newcastle, 1970-1989. Keywords. English literature essay film Hollywood integration Inuit John Ruskin King Lear literature poem theatre tragedy William Shakespeare women. Bibliographic information. William Shakespeare, the greatest English writer of drama, was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon. We do not know everything about Shakespeare's early life. But we know that he studied at the Grammar School in Stratford, and that he became interested in the theatre when he was still a boy. In 1586 Shakespeare went to London, where he worked in the theatre for some years before he began to write his own plays. Shakespeare soon became well-known in London literary circles. Every play that he wrote was good news to the people of the capital. Queen Elizabeth liked Shakespeare's plays, and th