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'FRAILTY! THY NAME IS WOMAN!' *

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ABSTRACT

It has been my age-long longing to find out what Shakespeare thinks about women. This article is written to fulfil that very overwhelming desire which I have procrastinated satiating for a long time due to a number of reasons. In quest of 'Shakespeare's women', I have decided to analyse the women characters in three of his tragedies, namely *Julius Caesar, Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. *'Frailty! Thy name is woman!'*, the barb which is used as the title of the article is cited from *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's masterpiece, which was written in approximately 1600.

KEYWORDS:
Women characters, frailty, beauty, sexist, equality

INTRODUCTION

Women are often regarded to be inferior to men. They are frequently referred to as the gentle sex and even as the inferior sex whereas men are usually called the sterner sex. A poet even accuses women as the ones who have caused trouble in the world, as we can see in the following verse:

God created men
Then He rested
God created women
Man's never rested
Since then. (Anonymous)

Moreover, in spite of the fact that the catalyst of the women's suffrage movement has been striving for equality between men and women for ages, modern society still underestimates women by confining them to *kinder, kirche und küche,* a German expression which means that the

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duties of a woman are to take care of the children, to go to church, and to cook in the kitchen (whereas a man's duties are to read the newspaper, to watch television, to smoke, and to rebuke his wife and children when necessary).

Gender discrimination, as a matter of fact, has taken place since the world began. Some people still wonder why God created Adam first and then Eve. Why did He not create them simultaneously? Was it because God Himself, being a man, was in favour of men so that Adam was endowed with the privilege of being the first-born human being? (The author of an article inquires whether God is masculine, feminine or neuter. Insofar as God's gender is concerned, however, I believe that a further analysis in this article would be no concern of us.)

Although history has shown that in China, India, Indonesia, and in many other parts of the world, women were treated as second-class citizens and even slaves, and although even in such a democratic country, like the United Stated of America, women are, in some respects, still regarded as the inferior sex, things might change if we could make much of the creation of women as is revealed in the Holy Bible:

> *Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him…' but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man, He made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said; 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of Man.'* (Genesis 2:18,20-23)

Furthermore, the misguided notion of male superiority may be avoided if we could grasp Peter Lombard's interpretation correctly. He affirms that Eve was taken neither from Adam's feet to be his slave nor from his head to be his master but from his side to be his friend. Matthew Henry's interpretation of the creation of the woman in the Bible also deserves to be mentioned for he asserts:

> *Woman was created*

Not from man's head to rule him
Nor from his feet to be trodden on
But from his rib to be protected by him
And from near his heart to be loved by him
(Matthew Henry)

The questions arise: 1. What does Shakespeare say about women in *Julius Caesar, Macbeth,* and *Hamlet?*
2. Must women be considered to be weak or must they be made equal to men?

THE WOMEN CHARACTERS IN *JULIUS CAESAR*

There are two women characters in *Julius Caesar*, namely Portia, the wife of Brutus (one of the conspirators), and Calpurnia, Caesar's wife. In this article, I would like to discuss Shakespeare's portrayal of Portia only because being a flat and static minor character, Calpurnia is not worth analysing.

After discussing their plan to assassinate Julius Caesar, the conspirators leave and Portia comes into her orchard and talks to Brutus. She wants him to tell her the reason for his sadness, as the following line reveals: *Make me acquainted with your cause of grief.* (II.i. 256) When Brutus tells her that he is unwell, she says:

Brutus is wise, and were he not in health,
He would embrace the means to come by it. (II.i. 258-259)

The meaning is: If you were unwell, you would gladly do what was necessary to regain your health. She presses him further:

Is Brutus sick? And is it physical
To walk unbracėd, and suck up the humours
Of the dank morning? What? Is Brutus sick?
And will he steal out of his wholesome bed
To dare the vile contagion of the night,
And tempt the rheumy and unpurgėd air,
To add unto his sickness? (II.i. 261-267)

She implies: If you were ill, it would not be a cure to go out without a cloak on and breathe in the mists and dews of the damp morning. Moreover, if you were ill, you would not steal out of your wholesome bed and risk catching an illness from the horrible cold night, and tempt the air which is not yet purified by the sun, which will give you a cough to add to your sickness.

Portia is bold. She dares to insist that her husband should tell her his secret. She thinks that as she is his wife, she has the right to know why her husband is full of sorrow and worry:

> *No, my Brutus,*
> *You have some sick offence within your mind,*
> *Which by the right and virtue of my place*
> *I ought to know of,… (II.i. 267-270)*

In the excerpt cited below, Portia again urges her husband to tell her his secret. She asks him whether there is some exception made so that she is not to know all the secrets which concern him. She wonders whether within the tie of secrecy which exists between husband and wife, she is only, as one might say, in a way, on some condition, to sit with him at meals, sleep with him, and talk to him sometimes. She asks him whether she should live only on the outskirts of his love and delight. She then says that if she is not more than that, she is simply his prostitute, not his wife.

> *Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,*
> *Is it excepted I should know no secrets*
> *That appertain to you? Am I yourself,*
> *But; as it were , in sort, or limitation,*
> *To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,*
> *And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs*
> *Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,*
> *Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife*. (II.i. 280-287)

Portia admits that as a woman, she is weak. In spite of that, as a woman that Brutus considers worthy to be his wife and as a woman of good reputation (Cato's daughter), she feels she is stronger than the rest of her sex. That is why she wants him to tell her his plan and she will not reveal it to anyone, as the following quotation shows:

I grant I am a woman, but withal,
A woman that Brutus took to wife.
I grant I am a woman, but withal,
A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter.
Think you I am no stronger than my sex
Being so fathered, and so husbanded?
Tell me your counsels. I will not disclose them. (II.i. 292-298)

Although Portia is presented as a patient and calm woman, she is very full of anxiety when she already knows her husband's plan, as is very well illustrated in the following dialogue:

Portia:
I prithee, boy, run to the Senate-house.
Stay not to answer me, but get thee gone
Why dost thou stay?
Lucius:
To know my errand, madam.
Portia:
I would have had thee there and here again,
Ere I can tell thee what thou shouldst do there.
O constancy, be strong upon my side!
Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!
I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.
How hard it is for women to keep counsel!
Art thou here yet?
Lucius:
Madam, what should I do?
Run to the Capitol, and nothing else?
And so return to you, and nothing else? (II.iv. 1-12)

Portia now admits that as a woman, she is weak and it is extremely difficult for her to keep a secret. She is so confused that she tells Lucius, her servant, to go to the Capitol and return to her without telling him what he should do in the Capitol.

Later in the same scene, Portia admits that as a woman, she has a weak heart. She unconsciously discloses her husband's plan, as is very well depicted in the following episode:

I must go in. Ay me! How weak a thing
The heart of woman is! O Brutus,
The heavens speed thee in thine enterprise.
[Aside] Sure, the boy heard me. Brutus hath a suit
That Caesar will not grant. O, I grow faint! (II.iv. 39-43)

Portia is bold, calm, beautiful, kind and gentle. She is a woman of noble birth who is loyal and faithful to her husband. Despite all her good qualities, as a woman, she is depicted as a weak person.

THE WOMEN CHARACTERS IN *MACBETH*

There are three women characters in *Macbeth,* namely Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff and a gentle woman attending on Lady Macbeth when she is ill in the castle of Dunsinane. In this article, however, I would like to focus mainly on Lady Macbeth, for the simple reason that there is not much to talk about the other two women characters, neither of whom is rendered with a very significant role in the play.

When we first see Lady Macbeth, she is reading a letter from her husband in Macbeth's castle at Inverness. It tells her of the witches' prophecy and particularly of the fact that according to the prophecy, her husband is destined to become king of Scotland. She fears that her husband is not evil enough to obtain what is promised by the most direct means. She reveals her own nature in the following speech:

...Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me; from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! (I.v.38-41)

Lady Macbeth considers women to be gentle; therefore, she wants the evil spirits who attend on murders to take her milk and give her gall instead, as the following lines reveal:

Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! (I.v.45-48)

Lady Macbeth is extremely ambitious. The letter she has received from her husband has both delighted her and carried her away beyond the present of which she is ignorant, and she feels what has been promised has become real and actual, as is very well illustrated in the following quotation:

> *Thy letter has transported me beyond*
> *This ignorant present, and I feel now*
> *The future in the instant.* (I.v.54-56)

When Macbeth says that Duncan has planned to stay at their castle and leave the following morning, Lady Macbeth says that he must be killed that night. She says: *'O! never – Shall sun that morrow see!'* (I.v.59) Lady Macbeth is very dominant. She gives her husband instructions. For instance, she tells him that if he wants to deceive the world, he must look like the world. Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth's idea in a very appropriate image using the flower and serpent in the citation below:

> *To beguile the time*
> *Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye,*
> *Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower*
> *But be the serpent under 't.* (I.v.61-64)

I would like to emphasize once again that Shakespeare reveals that Lady Macbeth is very dominant. When Macbeth says that they will talk about the murder later, she tells him to keep his look clear of evil signs so that nobody will be suspicious. All he must do is to look innocent because she will arrange everything for the murder of Duncan, as is evident in her remark: *'Leave all the rest to me.'* (I.v.71)

Is Lady Macbeth totally cruel? Shakespeare reveals that as a woman, Lady Macbeth is basically like other women who have feelings of humanity. She has to reckon with the finer feelings which are common to human nature. Her humanity is vividly depicted in the two lines below:

> *Had he not resembled*
> *My father as he slept , I had done 't.* (II.ii.12-13)

He says that if Duncan had not resembled her father as he slept, she herself would have killed him. (Duncan is probably Lady Macbeth's kinsman.)

Macbeth looks at his hands which are covered with blood and feels sorry for what he has done. When Lady Macbeth notices that her husband has forgotten to leave the blood-smeared daggers by the attendants (so that the crime should appear to be theirs), she immediately takes them back for him. When Macbeth is still filled with terror, Lady Macbeth tells him to wash quickly:

> *Go, get some water,*
> *And wash this filthy witness from your hand.* (II,ii.45-46)

Lady Macbeth calls her husband a coward and simply says that a little water may easily free them from blame:

> *My hands are of your colour; but I shame*
> *To wear a heart so white….*
> *A little water clears us of this deed:*
> *How easy is it then!* (II.ii.63-67)

Lady Macbeth is very brilliant. She is her husband's best support. In the banquet scene, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo in his place, but the others do not. Macbeth is stunned and he thinks that the table is full so that when he is asked to sit down, he speaks to the ghost in horror. Realizing that her husband has had Banquo murdered, Lady Macbeth immediately makes excuses for him and the ghost disappears. Macbeth proposes a toast to Banquo and the ghost reappears. This time, Macbeth is deeply appalled so that the feast cannot continue. Again, it is Lady Macbeth that expounds that Macbeth has had such an illness since his youth. She says:

> *Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus,*
> *And hath been from his youth: pray you, keep seat;*
> *The fit is momentary; upon a thought*
> *He will again be well. If much you note him*
> *You shall offend him, and extend his passion;* (III.iv.54-57)

> *I pray you; speak not; he grows worse and worse;*
> *Question enrages him. At once, good night;*
> *Stand not upon the order of your going;*
> *But go at once.* (III.iv.116-119)

Lady Macbeth's true characteristic can be seen in the great sleep-walking scene in the resolution, namely at the beginning of Act V. This extraordinarily touching scene shows that she is unable to sleep in peace. She appears with a taper in her hand, walking in her sleep and reliving in words and actions her experience and her thoughts of the murder of Duncan. Shakespeare reveals Lady Macbeth's softer nature through her somnambulism. He shows that she is really regretful of what she has done. Although she has previously said confidently: *'A little water clears us of this deed'*, she is finally compelled to admit, *'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.'* (V.i. 40-41). In brief, through the portrayal of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare reveals that Lady Macbeth is not a cold, unfeeling bloody villain as some people might think. Unlike her husband, as a guilty woman, Lady Macbeth is unable to free herself from her conscience and therefore, her mind is inevitably disturbed. In other words, Shakespeare shows that however strong, dominant, audacious, ambitious, brilliant, cruel and blood-thirsty a woman may seem, she is just a woman, a person with a gentle heart if not a weak nature.

THE WOMEN CHARACTERS IN *HAMLET*

There are two women characters in *Hamlet, namely* Ophelia and Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. Since the tragedy is about Prince Hamlet, Shakespeare mainly reveals the struggles going on within Hamlet. Much of the portrayal of Ophelia is for the smoothness of the plot and the development of Hamlet's character. Although Hamlet claims that he loves Ophelia very much, his plan to revenge his father's death compels him to pretend to be insane even when he is alone with Ophelia. In feigned derangement, Hamlet speaks to Ophelia, criticizing her and women in general:

> *I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and lisp and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I 'll no more on 't ,…*(III.i.142-146)

Hamlet accuses women as treacherous deceivers; they use cosmetics *(paintings)*, walk about with dance-like steps *(jig)*, drag their feet *(amble)*, talk in a lisping voice *(lisp)*, give fancy names to the things which God has

made *(nickname God's creatures)*, and pretend that this affected behaviour, which is designed to entice men *(wantonness),* comes from normal innocence *(ignorance)*. In no way is Ophelia portrayed to have good qualities. She is just a silly, submissive, and immature woman who considers it a filial duty to listen obeisantly to Polonius, her father, who advises her to eschew Hamlet. After Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius, Ophelia's mind is distracted. In dishevelled clothing, she appears with garlands of flowers. The snatches of rhymes she sings, the theme of which is concerned with a girl forsaken by her unfaithful darling and her lament for the death of her father, arouse an intensely pathetic feeling:

> *Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,*
> *All in the morning betime,*
> *And I am a maid at your window,*
> *To be your Valentine.*
> *Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,*
> *And dupped the chamber-door;*
> *Let in the maid, that out a maid*
> *Never departed more.* (IV.v.47 – 54)
>
> *They bore him barefaced on the bier;*
> *Hey non nonny, nonny, hey nonny;*
> *And in his grave rained many a tear* - (IV.v. 161 – 163)

Ophelia is not heard again until the Queen describes Ophelia's drowning as an accident (which is actually a suicide). In the burial scene, Hamlet proclaims his profound love for her:

> *I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers*
> *Could not, with all their quantity of love,*
> *Make up my sum*. (V.i. 250 – 252)

It is of major import to note that both Ophelia and Queen Gertrude, like Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, pose a visible representation of the weakness of women. (As evidenced by their deeds, thoughts, and behaviour, they cannot compete with Shakespeare's great heroines, such as Cleopatra in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Desdemona in *Othello*, and Cordelia in *King Lear*.) Queen Gertrude, who is portrayed to be merely absorbed in carnal or sensual and sensuous appetite, does not feel ashamed or guilty of marrying Claudius, the usurper whom Hamlet calls the villain who has

robbed the former king (Hamlet's father) *'of his life, crown, and queen',* right on the heel of her husband's death. By no means does the queen have any good traits. Hamlet's abhorrence of female frailty is particularly triggered by Gertrude's frailty as a woman so that he regards women in general as 'frailty'. Hamlet's invective towards his mother in the first line of the following extract conspicuously epitomizes Shakespeare's biased concept of a woman:

> ***…Frailty, thy name is woman! -***
> *A little month; or e' er those shoes were old*
> *With which she followed my poor father's body,*
> *Like Niobe, all tears - why she, even she -*
> *O God! A beast, that wants discourse of reason,*
> *Would have mourned longer - married with my uncle,*
> *My father's brother, but no more like my father*
> *Than I to Hercules! Within a month,*
> *Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears*
> *Had left the flushing in her galléd eyes,*
> *She married. - O, most wicked speed, to post*
> *With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!* (I.ii.146-157)

At the end of the play, this lustful, frivolous queen accidentally drinks the poisoned contents of the cup which Claudius has prepared for Hamlet.

CONCLUSION

Queer as it may seem, Shakespeare is evidently a sexist for he obviously reveals that women are weak. In *Julius Caesar*, he shows that however courageous, calm, firm, insistent, intelligent Portia is, she is essentially frail. Likewise, in *Macbeth* Shakespeare reveals that no matter how grim, unscrupulous, domineering, brilliant, and audacious Lady Macbeth is, she is basically a woman with a weak nature. Shakespeare's concept of a woman as a frail and fragile piece of earth is most conspicuously seen in *Hamlet*, for in this play Queen Gertrude and Ophelia are by no means portrayed to possess virtue, strength, perseverance or any other good 'trademarks'. He simply addresses them, implicitly and explicitly, as 'frail things'. Shakespeare's own unhappy experience with women has probably made him discriminate against women since it is generally assumed that he

did not enjoy wedded bliss; (in some of his comedies, such as *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, women are apparently mirrored as objects of ridicule and in *Twelfth Night*, his advice is that a woman should always marry a man who is older than herself.)

Frankly speaking, I disapprove of Shakespeare's depiction of women as 'frail things'. Even if women were weak, it would be our duty to make them equal to men. Although written in a humorous style, the following poem, which contains my profound thoughts on equality for women, has a serious theme:

THE MAN'S RIB

The man's rib
Is a unique rib
For out of the rib of the man
Doth He create a woman

Though from his rib
Never must she be robbed
Since she be from his rib
She is to be properly robed

Not from his shoulder to be grabbed
Not from his cheeks to be slapped
Not from his hair to be wrenched
Nor from his derrière to be spanked

Not from his eyes to stare at him
Not from his lip to scold him
Not from his mind to lie to him
Ergo, not from his … to lie on him

Not from his feet to be kicked
Not from his tongue to be licked
Not from his hip to be pinched
Ergo, not from his … to be raped or ripped

Not from his ears to be hissed

But from his rib to be his
Ergo, his to be hers and hers to be his
Ergo, his to be hers and hers to be his
(Peter Angkasa)

In order to expound my standpoint on the gender issue more grievously, I have been tempted to attempt to formulate my heuristical contemplation in another poem entitled *'FOR MEN'*:

'FOR MEN'
Equality for women! Equality for women!
Though Shakespeare says: *'Frailty, thy name is woman!'*
Do not ever say: *'Frailty, thy name is woman!'*
Let's say and say: 'Beauty, thy name's woman!'
Why must thou be prejudiced against women?

Isn't thy mom a woman?
Isn't thy wife a woman?
Aren't thy grandmothers women?
Thy (grand) children may also be women
Nobody would exist without women!

Whether thou art Asian or African
Whether Australian, European or American
Be thou a man or a woman
Thou must be born of a woman
For nobody is born of a man

If thou not love a woman
Why doth thou woo a woman?
Why doth thou make her woe, man?
Love her, lift her and lift her, man!
Make her equal to thee, man!
(Peter Angkasa)

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