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Shakespearean Female Monarchs: Early Modern Empowerment or a Cautionary Tale? A Feminist Critique of Selected Plays

Weronika Dziurleja | Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu
ORCID: 0009-0004-6586-5467

Abstract

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The aim of this article is to analyse three Shakespearean female monarchs in terms of their nonconformity with the stringent societal gender expectation of the Early Modern period and to determine how the plays suggest that the characters' behaviour should be assessed. As the main analysis focuses on royal women, this article provides a brief historical perspective on queenship during that era. The main part of the article is the feminist analysis of Gertrude, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra whose common denominator is their royal status and womanhood as well as their untraditional and nonconforming behaviour. The investigation delves into their relations with others, their importance to the plot, and the way they wield power and exert influence. What follows is an examination of how each of the characters dies and what it might symbolise in a broader social context. As in each case the death of an unruly female character marks the reemergence of a patriarchal order, the article arrives at the conclusion that the characters are punished for their subversive behaviour and what these plays do is perpetuate the masculine view of the world.

Szekspirowskie monarchinie – nowożytna forma empowermentu czy opowieść ku przestrodze? Feministyczna analiza wybranych dramatów Szekspira (Streszczenie)

Słowa kluczowe:
feminizm, Szekspir, gender studies

W artykule dokonano analizy literackiej trzech Szekspirowskich monarchiń pod kątem niewypełnienia przez nie narzuconych przez nowożytne społeczeństwo ról i łamania surowych wzorców zachowań oraz starano się ustalić, czy ceną za takie zachowanie jest nagroda czy kara. Jako że główna analiza skupia się na postaciach ściśle związanymi z monarchią, w artykule znajduje się krótki opis roli królowej w epoce nowożytnej. Głównym punktem artykułu jest feministyczna analiza Gertrudy, Lady Makbet oraz Kleopatry, których wspólnym mianownikiem jest ich królewski status oraz kobiecość, jak i to, że zachowują się w sposób łamiący ówczesne zasady decorum. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono ich relacjom z innymi osobami dramatu, ich istotności dla akcji tragedii,

sposobowi, w jaki dzierżą władzę oraz wywierają wpływy. Następnie poruszony zostaje temat ich śmierci oraz tego, co ona symbolizuje w szerszym kontekście społecznym. Biorąc pod uwagę fakt, że w każdym z przypadków śmierć bohaterki, która obala ówczesne wzorce, wiąże się z powrotem patriarchatu, nasuwa się konkluzja, że są one karane za swoją niesubordynację i transgresyjne zachowanie, a sztuka sama w sobie powiela męskie wzorce i spojrzenie na świat.

Introduction

The Early Modern period is often considered the glorious era of the world, the rebirth of science, and the return to ancient ideals. Present among such ideals were the return to humanism, anthropocentrism, and the view of humankind being the pinnacle of God's creation. Still, none of the aforementioned notions proposed at the time contributed to gender equality. As noted by Davies (1997: 87–88) Renaissance humanism was not consistent in its claims and focused primarily on the centrality of men since women were often perceived as "(…) imperfect creatures, the errors of nature, the fall of man (…)" (Florio, 1591: 173, cited in Davies 1997: 87). Such an assumption had profound consequences on the gender dynamics in the Renaissance society. While men were granted authority, superiority and a higher position in the social hierarchy, women were relegated to secondary and inferior roles. In this misogynist and patriarchal realm women had limited options and had to succumb to the societal rules.

The literature of the Early Moderns operated within this male-governed reality and portrayed its characters in accordance with the established gender roles. Within Shakespearean canon one may find female characters who epitomize stereotypes and act consonantly with the feminine ideals of the time. However, in his works the English Bard included some female characters that actively oppose and defy those stringent impositions. The tragedies which are the topic of this article, i.e., *Hamlet*, *Macbeth,* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, feature such female characters. The three queens pictured in the plays transgress the societal rules of female conduct and disregard the constraints imposed on them while trying to carve a new path for themselves. Nonetheless, the question remains whether such an untraditional representation of women is indeed a form of early modern advocacy for a wider social change in viewing the position of women in society, or is it more of a perpetuation of commonly accepted gender order and a warning for those who would want to change that? The article strives to analyse the three main female characters of the aforementioned tragedies, namely Gertrude, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra, to determine which option is more likely.

Queenship in the Early Modern England and Europe

Despite the predominance of patriarchal beliefs across Europe, the Early Moderns found themselves under the rule of female monarchs for quite an extensive period of time. Prominent figures such as Catherine de Medici, Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I presided over some of the most influential states of this period, directly impacting the course of history and shaping the political arena of the period. Some of their greatest achievements were the arrangement of powerful marriages, Edict of Amboise;[1] proclamation of religious peace; introduction of the Act of Uniformity,[2] renewal and a slight but important edition of the Act of Supremacy, as well as the victory over the Spanish Armada. As the majority of those accomplishments are connected with the religious sphere of life, they depict how aptly the queens reacted to fast-paced social changes in the time of the religious reformation. Nonetheless, the institution of an independent and self-governing queen was contradictory to the early modern values and could potentially distort the traditional social order, since royal women wielded a considerate amount of power and were trusted with typically male responsibilities; thus, they debunked the agreed upon gender order. The institution of queenship was in itself a distortion or subversion of a typical femininity, male superiority, and gender dynamics. Therefore, such powerful women often met with derogation, disparagement and the belittlement of their skills. The political position of women was widely debated by both the proponents and opponents of such a state of affairs: the ones who were not in favour of female rulers tried to undermine the position of a queen and present the female reign as unnatural.

John Knox, a 16th-century Scottish protestant reformer and Calvinist, who openly criticised queens such as Mary Queen of Scotland and Queen Mary of England, published *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* in 1558, where he justifies his claims. In his tirade he says:

> For who can deny that it repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick and the impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole and strong, and finally, that the foolish, mad, and frenetic shall govern the discreet, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women compared unto man, in bearing of authority. For their sight in the civil regiment is but a blindness: their strength – weakness: their counsel foolishness: and judgement frenzy, if it be rightly considered" (Knox 1558, as in Aughterson 1995: 136).

He emphasises the inferiority of women and substantiates his claims through the use of vivid comparisons which are deeply rooted in the stereotype of a weak woman,

[1] The act issued by Catherine de Medici in 1562 guaranteed a limited religious freedom to Huguenots and allowed them to practice their religion in their homes.
[2] Issued by Elizabeth I, the act brought back *The Book of Common Prayer* into the church and standardised religious services.

inapt to play a political and highly influential role, but also naturally lacking the skills crucial for such a position.

On the other side of this conflict were those who adopted a slightly more lenient approach to the rule of women, though still neither emancipatory nor free from gender stereotypes. An example of a proponent of female monarchs is Aylmer, a church official appointed bishop of London after his return from exile. He opposed Knox and his claims, arguing that women in certain instances have a right to succession and, consequently, to the throne and political power; therefore, it would be unlawful to deny them this right (Aylmer 1559, as in Aughterson 1995: 138–140). This may be not so much an advocacy for women to rule *suo jure* as a protection of lawfulness and righteousness; nevertheless, it is an advocacy for the protection of women's rights. Aylmer (1559), just like Knoxx (1558), stressed the feebleness of women, but relied on the idea of the ruler having two bodies, namely body natural and body political;[3] thus, he argued in favour of women's claim to power, all while reinforcing the weaker position of women in marriage and of ordinary, non-royal women within a broader social context.

Needless to mention, Knox's conservative and strict approach does not diverge from the general consensus regarding women, nor does Aylmer's slightly more progressive stance. Both authors adhere to the early modern preconceptions and gender expectations imposed on women and portray them as "the weaker vessel" (Fletcher 1995: 60), with little or none right to preside over men.

Feminist Reading of Selected Plays

Each of the three tragedies selected for this analysis features a female character who subverts traditional gender roles and expectations, which leads to disastrous consequences not only for herself but also for the other characters around her. The forms of noncompliance are varied and expressed in a plethora of ways across those tragedies, as every female character uses different means to win over or adapt the existing patriarchal space to her needs. As both classical and Elizabethan tragedies punish their characters for unethical transgressions, all the queens discussed in this article eventually die. What is worth analysing is how they are portrayed and what the resolution of each play may indicate in terms of gender norms and expectations. The way Shakespeare finishes each of the discussed plays ends the non-conforming behaviour of a woman and re-establishes a fully patriarchal social order. This may suggest that Shakespeare's tragedies condemn and discourage any signs of behaviour that is inconsistent with the early modern gender norms.

[3] A medieval theory according to which a monarch's physical appearance or the so called "body natural" could suffer from various diseases, disabilities or old age, but his "body political", his figure as the king was secure because he was chosen by God to always have the country's best interests in mind (Kantorowicz 1957: 5–7).

Gertrude

To follow the chronological sequence of Shakespeare's plays, Gertrude is the first character to be analysed. She appears in the play as early as in Act One, Scene Two, which is also the moment when the audience becomes aware of one of the dilemmas experienced by Hamlet, the eponymous hero. It is revealed that approximately two months after the death of king Hamlet, Gertrude's husband, she married his brother Claudius. This "o'erhasty marriage" (Shakespeare 2003: 2.2.57) is what enrages Hamlet even before he becomes aware of the treacheries behind his father's death; therefore, as noted by Adelman (1992: 16–17), it is actually his mother's behaviour, rather than the loss of his father, that causes Hamlet's mourning and deteriorating mental state. Gertrude's sexuality and what he considers to be an incestuous remarriage are the aspects that Hamlet cannot accept, as he believes they dishonour his father and reveal the corruption of the world. Hamlet perceives his mother as an "unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature" (Shakespeare 2003: 1.2.135-6), which illustrates how abnormal and unnatural he considers the union between Gertrude and Claudius. Adelman (1992:17) also points out that this comparison between his mother and an unkept garden plays on the imagery of the Virgin Mother, who is often referenced to as tended and enclosed garden, while Gertrude's new marriage makes her dirty and soiled. Being a sexual human being but – more importantly – a sexually active mother, Gertrude poses a threat to Hamlet's view of the world and elicits his disgust. She is perceived as a woman who has an unparalleled sexual lust, which not only challenges the image of a woman who is pure and chaste, but also destabilises the role, power, and an idealised image of Hamlet's father.

Such a hasty marriage and a brief period of mourning also raise questions about her fidelity to her late husband and make an extramarital relation with Claudius a probable scenario. Actually, Claudius is called "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (Shakespeare 2003, 1.5.42) by the ghost, which could hint at Gertrude's infidelity. However, Heilbrun (1957: 206) argues that Gertrude is never described in such terms and that the word "adulterous" has undergone semantic restriction, becoming very specific in its modern usage, whereas for early modern writer it referred to "any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one" (Heilbrun 1957: 206). Therefore, she offers two other interpretations which refute the possibility of Gertrude having any romantic or sexual relationship with Claudius prior to her husband's death. Her first reading of this word complies with the idea of this marriage being an incestuous one, i.e., adulterous in the early modern understanding. The second one considers the modern meaning of this word but focuses on the ghost's relation to Gertrude, as he may still consider himself her righteous husband, hence her new marriage is perceived by him as an adultery. Despite those ambiguities, Gertrude's sexuality remains a bone of contention between her and her son. The fact that she is and wants to be sexually active after her husband's death

is frowned upon by Hamlet, for whom such a behaviour is most probably an infringement of female rules of conduct. And it is indeed by having this sexual side to her that Gertrude defies the constraints imposed on women. Moreover, her "rampant sexuality" is not something that she tries to deny by keeping up appearances. In the closet scene, when Hamlet accuses his mother of uncontrollable sexual passion, she does not try to prove him wrong:

> HAMLET: Proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will.
>
> GERTRUDE: O Hamlet, speak no more.
> Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.
>
> (Shakespeare 2003: 3.4.85–91)

In this scene Gertrude does not try to persuade her son that his words or accusations are incorrect; instead, she admits that they are true. According to Heilbrun (1957: 205), Gertrude has the ability to present reality as it is without embellishments and straight to the point, which is clearly demonstrated in this scene. She embraces the fact that it is her sexual passion that drives her actions, she perceives it as her imperfection and although she does not wish to dwell on it further, at the same time she neither wants to hide nor reject it.

This ability to encapsulate reality and act as a narrator at times is specifically visible when she describes the circumstances of Ophelia's death. Since Ophelia dies off-stage, Gertrude has a crucial role in communicating the message and the manner of Ophelia's death to the audience, which makes her an active creator of the course of actions. It is up to her how she wishes to portray the young woman's death, and she chooses to depict it as an accident rather than a suicide:

> There on the pendant boughs her cronet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious silver broke,
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
> And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
> (…)
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death.
>
> (Shakespeare 2003: 4.7.172-83)

Not only does Gertrude interrupt the conversation between Claudius and Laertes, but in doing so, she also manages to draw their attention to Ophelia and the tragic quality of her character. Moreover, as it happens after the murder of Polonius and during Claudius' plotting against Hamlet, she ensures that Ophelia's death will not go unnoticed and, most likely unknowingly, adds another layer to Laertes' anger. Another important aspect is the choice of words to ensure that Ophelia will be buried in accordance with the Christian rituals, which ultimately happens despite many doubts concerning her death (Montgomery 2009: 108–110). What is also noticeable with regard to Gertrude's ability to read and correctly interpret the signs is that she might be anticipating the upcoming tragedy and the deaths that follow Polonius' murder, as she says that "Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss" (Shakespeare 2003: 4.5.18) and then repeats her point after Ophelia dies (Montgomery 2009: 108). This possibility that Gertrude could be aware of the tragic consequences that are to come may prove her great social, political, and emotional awareness. Such an ability, best seen in Gertrude's report of Ophelia's death, is definitely a mark of an intelligent woman who understands the realities of the world and is able to draw conclusion on her own and to make her own decisions, rather than being the passion-blinded woman as portrayed by Hamlet.

Her noncompliance with the traditional gender *status quo* is also visible in her relationship with Claudius as she proves not to be an obedient wife. She starts acting against Claudius during the closet scene, when Hamlet asks her not to "ravel all this matter out, / That I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft" (Shakespeare 2003: 3.4.187-9), which is a part of the scheme that Hamlet invents in order to avenge his father's murder. Gertrude responds by saying:

> Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
> And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
> What thou hast said to me.
>
> (Shakespeare 2003: 3.4.198-200)

She does not only agree to that, but she also keeps this promise until the end of the play. In fact, she assures Claudius twice that Hamlet is "Mad as the sea and wind" (Shakespeare 2003: 4.1.7) and that "his madness, like some ore / Among a mineral of metal base, / Shows itself pure" (Shakespeare 2003: 4.1.25-7); and thus keeps her promise. Whether she actually believes in her son's sanity is disputable as both Heilbrun (1957: 205) and Adelman (1992: 15) put forward a hypothesis that she does not, while Montgomery (2009: 105) excludes such a possibility. Nevertheless, all three seem to be unanimous in claiming that this is indeed the moment when she starts parting with her husband and gets closer or even reclaims her bond with Hamlet. Montgomery (2009: 104–105) also observes that even though this shift may be seen simply as a shift of the governing body over Gertrude, from husband to son, it may also represent Gertrude as an individual agent who distinguishes good from

evil and makes decisions in accordance with her own moral code. Her resistance towards Claudius is particularly visible in the final act of the play, the duel scene, when Gertrude exposes Claudius's true colours and ruins his scheme by drinking the poisoned drink. Her fall goes unnoticed, and Claudius ascribes it to her feminine weakness, but she still manages to warn Hamlet that "the drink! O my dear Hamlet! / The drink, the drink! I am poisoned" (Shakespeare 2003: 5.2.289–90) a moment before her death. Montgomery (2009: 100–101, 111–112) recognizes those lines as the pinnacle of Gertrude's development as an individual who reclaims full agency over herself at the end of her life. In the last minutes of her life, she fully frees herself from Claudius's influence by contradicting him and exposing his treacheries.

Finally, Gertrude serves as a catalyst for the tragedy. She is the common denominator among the male characters around whom the play revolves and many scholars agree that Gertrude is indeed placed in the centre of the play. Heilbrun (1957: 201), for example, notices that she is the person who connects the main characters by being the former wife of the ghost, the current wife of Claudius and the mother of Hamlet, while Montgomery (2009: 101) puts forward the claim that Gertrude's experiences throughout the play follow or mimic the experiences of Hamlet. They have both lost an important person in their lives, they are both affected by Claudius's seizure of power, they both hamper Claudius' plans, expose his treacheries, and finally, they both die from poisoning. Hence, the resemblance between the queen and her son is indisputable. This visible mirroring between the son and the mother makes Gertrude a *dramatis persona* of equal importance to the play's events, positioned at the centre rather than in the background of the plot. Therefore, she can be interpreted as a tragic heroine, whose death is the result of a tragic mistake and misjudgement of the situation.

Lady Macbeth

The second queen to be discussed is Lady Macbeth. During her very first appearance on stage, one may notice a certain extraordinariness of her position in the marriage, as Macbeth refers to her as the "dearest partner of greatness" (Shakespeare 2015: 1.5.11). This unusual term of endearment as well as the fact that Macbeth wishes to share the prophecy with his wife as soon as possible reveal quite an exceptional, by early modern standards, model of a relationship based not so much on gender hierarchy as on partnership. Asp (1981: 159) notices that Macbeth treats his wife as his equal and seeks to share power with her rather than wield it individually. Such a portrayal of the marriage already places Lady Macbeth in a more privileged position than many early modern women enjoyed and contradicts the gender *status quo* of the period.

Apart from the influence Lady Macbeth exerts in the marriage, there are also many more features of her character that make her noncompliant and subversive. For one,

her attitude towards Macbeth does not emanate the prevalent and contemporary ideals. While she does not question her husband's aptitude for the role foretold to him, as she ultimately wants him to succeed, she nevertheless sees him as an imperfect man and is able to recognize his vices. She describes him as "too full o'th'milk of human kindness" (Shakespeare 2015: 1.5.17) and admits that his docility and amiability may blight their chances for the splendid royal future. This ability to pinpoint the traits of Macbeth's character and foresee their possible ruinous consequences showcases how observant, vigilant, and cognisant Lady Macbeth is. What is more, she recognizes herself to be the driving power of this relationship. Therefore, in her soliloquy she commands Macbeth to "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear, / And chastise with the valour of my tongue" (Shakespeare 2015: 1.5.25-8) so that she can impart this strength to him and galvanize him into action. Bushnell (1992: 348) points out that she even tries to serve as a model of masculinity for him to follow, which could imply that he does not adhere to the rules of manhood, as expected by Lady Macbeth. Her vision of masculinity is a toxic approval of violence, blinding ambition and the lack of respect for others. What she associates with masculinity is simply evil, and evil is what she becomes. Hence, as Macbeth's virtues are the opposite of immorality, she perceives him as lacking in his manhood. Similar view is shared by Adelman (1992: 58) who notices that by ascribing such traits to her husband, Lady Macbeth finds him more feminine than herself. Thus, from the very beginning of the play it is apparent that Lady Macbeth does not embody the stereotypical feminine character traits. She is ambitious, methodological, and ready to take action to make their dream – hers and her husband's – come true. She also most probably finds Macbeth to be the weaker person in this relationship, the one who needs some prodding to pursue his goals. French (1992: 17) observes the discrepancy between what Lady Macbeth is supposed to do as a wife, namely, foster or even elicit a gentler side of her husband – and what she actually does, which is to renounce her femininity in order to succeed:

> Come, you Spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And feel me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
> (…)
> Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall, your murth'ring ministers.
>
> (Shakespeare 2015: 1.5.40-48)

Living in a deeply patriarchal realm, she does hold various preconceptions about women and reveals in her speech that she identifies femininity with weakness. Therefore, what she desires is to be deprived of her femininity so that, instead of being feeble and vulnerable, she could be powerful and strong. She wishes to be unsexed

and imbued with masculine characteristics, or those she identifies as masculine, such as cruelty, since only then will she be able to achieve her aims. Adelman (1992: 56–57) also emphasizes that Lady Macbeth seeks not only a psychological transformation, but also a physiological one. She wants her body to be deprived of reproductive and maternal functions, which identify her as a woman. What is also worth emphasising here, as Alfar (2003: 116–117) claims, is that she is most probably willing to sacrifice her femininity in order to be able to satisfy her husband and to ensure their future success. As has been argued, if Lady Macbeth's goal is to make her husband king because she genuinely believes he would excel in this role and deserves to become one, then her reasons are not entirely individualistic or selfish, and they do not stem from a complete moral corruption. Hence, the picture of Lady Macbeth that Alfar (2003) depicts is one of a devoted wife and, at the same time, a very determined and overtly ambitious person.

The theme of motherhood as deeply embedded in femininity reappears when Macbeth intends to renege on his promise and starts questioning the plan to murder Duncan. However, to go back on one's word is unmanly and dishonourable, Lady Macbeth suggests. Her perseverance as well as manipulative skills become obvious when she says:

> I have given suck and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd the brains out, had I sworn
> As you have done to this.
>
> (Shakespeare 2015: 1.7.54–9)

Such a horrifying metaphor uttered by a woman, for whom traditionally motherhood should be the ultimate objective and source of joy, highlights the importance of a promise. By relying on this vivid comparison and saying that she would murder a child if she promised to do so, Lady Macbeth directly touches upon Macbeth's virility, and belittles it. She manages to mark her superiority over Macbeth and, due to her manipulative nature reminiscent of Machiavellian traits, she puts her plan into action (Adelman 1992: 59).

Macbeth's virility is what Lady Macbeth ardently incorporates into her tactics. Whenever their endeavour is questioned, she alludes to the lack of manhood within her husband and toys with him saying "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Shakespeare 2015: 1.7.49), all of which prompts further action. French (1992: 17–18) points out that to be masculine in Lady Macbeth's eyes is to be free from any vulnerability that might impede one's success, and this is how she wants her husband to be. She plays an important part in Macbeth's internal struggle between good and evil, and through her rhetoric grounded in his weaknesses and desires, Lady Macbeth

elicits and intensifies the more sinister side of her husband. She instigates the initial crime, while he functions merely as a tool in her hands. Evidently, she knows her husband very well and understands how to use this knowledge to ensure that their goals and aspirations materialise. What is also important is that she is guided by their mutual longing for kingship and queenship, which indicates her belief in Macbeth's abilities (Alfar 2003: 127). Despite this mark of her devotion towards him, it is not a sign of her selflessness or altruism as she also has a status to be gained. Paradoxically, although what Macbeth wants to prove is his compliance with the model of masculinity presented to him by his wife, Bushnell (1992: 348) notices that what he does is ultimately unmanly because he subjugates himself to a woman's order.

After the murder, Lady Macbeth wishes to remain an active participant of the play. While Macbeth says, "Look on't I dare not" (Shakespeare 2015: 2.2.51), she plants the daggers and smears the blood on the two sleeping servants. This is a very minor yet quite significant act of disobedience. Even though they both considered the murder independently, and it was not initiated solely by the wife, she was the one who persuaded Macbeth to commit it when he wavered. Her forcefulness was clearly visible in that scene; however, after the murder is committed, she loses control over her husband. He starts drifting away from her influence, and her position diminishes. Hard as she might try, she is unable to retain influence and becomes largely irrelevant to her husband, which is particularly evident when Macbeth learns about her death and remains indifferent (Bushnell 1992: 349–350).

Cleopatra

Another queen who opposes patriarchal and masculine realities, to be discussed in this article, is Cleopatra. As an African queen she challenges both Roman notions of masculine rule and European ideals. Her race and gender are inextricably intertwined, as she is subjected to stereotypes regarding her womanhood as well as her racial identity. Alfar (2002: 140–141) draws attention to the fact that Egypt, with a queen as its ruler, becomes feminised and stands in opposition to the masculine Roman Empire. Such a narrative, based on binary oppositions and imbalanced power relations, gives the Romans the impression that they have the right to conquer Egypt. As they represent the masculine realm, they are associated with superiority and power, in contrast to the inferior and feminine Egypt. Furthermore, as Cleopatra is referred to as the "serpent of old Nile" (Shakespeare 1995: 1.5.26), she not only embodies the entire nation, but effectively becomes the entire country itself, as if she and Egypt constituted one and the same body, rendering the conquest of Egypt both literal and figurative, and suffused with sexual connotation. If, indeed, Cleopatra and Egypt are one, then the possibility of her triumph – and thus the triumph of the feminine over the masculine – poses a threat to both Roman imperialism and societal norms.

Being well aware of the preconceptions Rome holds against her, Cleopatra intentionally plays on those stereotypes and uses them as a part of her political strategy (Alfar 2003: 138). She does not deploy Roman, that is masculine, tactics but invents feminine politics of her own. She exaggerates her femininity to manipulate Antony which helps her achieve her political goals and protect her country.

It is already in the first scene that she masks her political acumen with apparent frivolity and entices Antony to open a letter from Octavius, in which she imagines that he wrote "Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise" Egypt (Shakespeare 1995: 1.1.23). According to Alfar (1003: 145) Cleopatra's unconcern is only superficial, as she knows that her future and, by extension, the future of Egypt is fully dependant on Rome's benevolence; thus, she needs to be aware of Caesar's every intention. Regardless of her feelings towards Antony, she simply relies on his social position as well as his love for her as a shield against misfortune. She seeks Antony's reassurance of his affection toward her and his alliance to Egypt because that is how she can secure the existence of an independent Egypt. She is successful and Antony pledges to be her "soldier, servant, making peace or war / As thou affects" (Shakespeare 1995: 1.3.69-71). Hence, what she ultimately achieves is Antony's subjugation to her will and his subordinance within their relationship. Her sexual politics are by no means confined solely to Antony. The line, "she made great Caesar lay his royal sword to bed; / He ploughed her, and she cropp'd" (Shakespeare 1995: 2.2.227-8) demonstrates that during the First Triumvirate she likewise used her sexuality to protect her country.

Given the precarious political situation of Egypt – especially after the battle from which the Egyptian fleet flees – Cleopatra knows that she needs to reconsider with whom she aligns herself. This military defeat means a growing power and dominance of Caesar. Fully aware of the potential consequences for Egypt, Cleopatra is ready to sacrifice her relationship. When asked to betray Antony she answers:

> Say to great Caesar this in deputation:
> I kiss his conqu'ring hand. Tell him, I am prompt
> To lay my crown at's feet, and there to kneel.
> Till from his all-obeying breath I hear
> The doom of Egypt.
>
> (Shakespeare 1995: 3.13.79-82)

Although Antony deems her to be "a boggler ever" (Shakespeare 1995: 3.13.15), Cleopatra is regarded by Alfar (2003: 151–152) as a tactician striving to prevent further conquest. She has practised the same tactics for years, first with Julius, then with Antony, and now with Octavius.

Antony quickly forgives Cleopatra, however, during the battle of Actium the situation recurs and Cleopatra's fleet flees once more. After this second defeat and humiliation, Antony's rage is such that he starts threatening that "the witch shall die" (Shakespeare

1995: 4.12.47). Fearing that he may act on his murderous threats, Cleopatra decides to stage her death and hide, hoping to either protect herself or placate Antony. What may seem a rushed decision is actually a calculated and well-considered plan which protects both her and her country (Alfar 2003: 154). Yet, when her plan spins out of control and the guilt-ridden Antony commits suicide, Cleopatra is left at the mercy of Caesar. Once again, she chooses to subdue herself:

> Pray you tell him
> I am his fortune's vassal and I send him
> The greatness he has got. I hourly learn
> A doctrine of obedience, and would gladly
> Look him i'th' face.
>
> (Shakespeare 1995: 5.2.28-32)

This scenario, however, never transpires because Cleopatra refuses to be fully dominated by Caesar and will not allow Egypt to fall completely under Roman control. As argued by Alfar (2003: 155), the ongoing colonisation of Egypt does not imply that Cleopatra strives to be submissive, yet, if she were to continue the relationship, such subjugation would be inevitable. Therefore, in order to extricate herself from the masculinist realm of Rome, Cleopatra is left with only one option: suicide.

Unlike Antony, Cleopatra does not make a decision to take her life motivated by love; her suicide is not an immediate response to Anthony's death. She does it so to avoid being humiliated and paraded in triumph by Caesar. It is the preservation of honour and the obstruction of Caesar's plans that most probably lie at the core of her decision, which contrasts starkly with Antony's reasons. While he is the one who behaves in a more feminine way, as his decision is driven by emotions, she makes a calculated political move. Furthermore, both Cook (1996: 264–265) and Alfar (2003: 156) refer to the manner of her suicide, by asp bite, as liberating but at the same time mocking and scornful. It is liberating as she finally denounces the exaggerated form of femininity on which she has been relying for a long time by saying, "I have nothing / Of woman in me" (Shakespeare 1995: 5.2.237–8); hence, she rejects the image of femininity that was imposed on or expected from her by the Romans. Additionally, the flamboyant attire and the bite ridicule the "Roman idea of stoic suicide" (Cook 1996: 264). To triumph over Caesar, Cleopatra must die; by escaping his dominance over her, she manages to expose the limitations of Ceasar's power. Cleopatra remains unclaimed and unconquered by the powerful and seemingly invincible Roman Emperor.

So far, Cleopatra and Antony's relationship has been discussed as a part of a larger political scheme and therefore in connection with Cleopatra's public sphere of life. However, there is also a gentler and more intimate side to this union. In these very private moments between the lovers, gender roles are likewise blurred, and both

Antony and Cleopatra behave in a way that does not align with expectations. Within this relationship, it is Cleopatra who assumes a more stereotypically masculine role, which becomes particularly evident when she reminisces about a time when:

> I laughed him out of patience; and that night
> I laughed him into patience; and the next morn,
> Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed;
> Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
> I wore his sword Phillipian.
>
> (Shakespeare 1995: 5.2.19-23)

This memory presents Cleopatra taking an active role in a sexual situation. She not only dresses Antony in her robes, but she also takes away his sword and thus emasculates him. As Cook interprets it (1996: 253), the sword – being a phallic object – represents Cleopatra self-masculinisation as she recognizes that she can be as successful in the role of a man as she is in the role of a woman. Moreover, it is Cleopatra that reminisces about her romantic and sexual encounters with Antony, which places her in a position of an active subject, and Antony in a position of a passive object of her desire. This reverses the traditional and early modern vision of a male–female relationship in which it is the woman who is the object of the man's sexual desire.

Finally, Shakespeare's Cleopatra differs from the historical and the Plutarchan Cleopatra in her childlessness. Although there are a few references to Cleopatra's children in the play, they never actually appear in it. Deprived of her maternity, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is stripped of one of the most important feminine as well as royal roles. As she is never confined to the typically feminine sphere, she is never associated with the domestic realm of hearth and home. Positioned at the centre of the political scene and with her motherhood largely absent, Cleopatra is perceived as an evil manipulator, willing to take every possible measure to achieve her goals (Darraj 2001, cited in Randazzo 2012).

Early Emancipation or Condemnation?

Having analysed all the three characters in terms of their nonconformity, let us consider what might be the message behind their fates. As each of these heroines dies a tragic death, it is apparent that Shakespeare makes a point of putting an end to their subversive behaviour – each dies as if being punished for breaking the social norms of their times. For Gertrude, it is her pursuit of interpersonal relations, sexual freedom, and a refusal to live a solitary, grief-stricken life after her husband's death that makes her drift away from a stereotype of a perfect woman and mother. Although the way she is portrayed, with a deep understanding of the context in which she operates and her rhetorical skills, indicating her breadth of character and intelligence, she is never fully acknowledged by other men, not even when she dies.

Moreover, it is only when she dies that she is able to reconcile with Hamlet, atone for what he believes to be her misdeeds and regain a position of a maternal figure. In the scene of her death, she passes away almost imperceptibly. As with Ophelia, she once again becomes the narrator of the events and pronounces her own death lest it be overlooked by the duelling men. By revealing that the wine is poisonous, she also manages to expose Claudius' corruption. Although she is a vital character for the entire play, she is often ignored and disregarded by the male characters. Despite being a queen, she still struggles to enter the masculine realm, as it is quite hermetic. Because of these nonconforming qualities, she is barred from the masculine context and considered a "wretched queen" (Shakespeare 2003: 5.2.365) by her son.

The circumstances of Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra are very different since it is rather their unique position of power and how they wield it that make them a disruptive influence in the plays. The Macbeths initially reverse the patriarchal gender order and provide a distorted and untraditional image of a marriage. A strict dichotomy of the sexes is still visible in the text, especially in the scenes when Lady Macbeth reflects upon what is feminine and masculine, but the characters seem not to adhere to these early modern visions of those concepts. There are many instances in which Lady Macbeth exerts her influence on her husband, taking a more active and masculine role than him. After the murder, once her position diminishes, she starts descending into madness and passivity as she no longer seems to be important in Macbeth's life. Like Gertrude, she is never able to fully enter the masculine realm; she is not only unsuccessful in trying to be the active force behind Macbeth's behaviour, but she is also punished for the attempt. The initially distorted gender order becomes rigidly established toward the end of the play and the Macbeths no longer diverge from it. Alfar (2003: 131), for example, draws attention to their death scenes: while Lady Macbeth dies a feminine, very private death, her husband dies on a battlefield. Therefore, there are little or no remnants of what their relationship looked like at the very beginning, the prevalent gender order takes precedence and there is no space for those who defy it.

Although, as mentioned earlier, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra share the motif of power, their contexts differ significantly. Cleopatra, as the queen of Egypt, wields considerably more power and influence from the beginning of the play. Being a political leader of a country in a perilous situation, she must actively participate in political events. She relies on her sexuality and femininity to extract information and to protect herself as well as her country, but she still faces many impediments to her success and her fate remains tragic. Cleopatra turns to male protection; she plays the role of a maiden in distress whom Roman rulers desperately want to save. This is a strategy that has proved effective both for her and her country, even though it implies manipulation. But what if it is the only way she can ensure her country's independence? Were she to give up her strategy, she could face similar exclusion from the male political sphere,

just like the other queens did. The relationships that she pursues keep her informed and vigilant, which is crucial for the future of her country.

Whilst the death of Lady Macbeth does not affect her husband, Cleopatra actually manages to achieve something by her suicide. She refuses to be subdued and exposes the finiteness of the power of Rome and Ceasar; therefore, she remains a female character that subverts gender roles until the very end. However, what happens to both Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra is somehow similar as they both fail in their pursuits and, after a moment of gender distortion, the world returns to its previous "proper" order. Adelman (*Fantasies of Maternal Power in Macbeth* 1992: 66) interprets the approach of Birnam Wood, composed of male characters only, as the symbol of the return of the "natural" order of the world, a representation of a political world devoid of women. A similar trope appears in *Antony and Cleopatra*. When Cleopatra dies, the Roman power is reinforced and the political arena is once again free of any feminine influences.

To conclude, let us return to the initial question whether Shakespeare is more of a forward-looking proto-feminist writer, or whether he aligns himself with views contemporary to him. Considering how each female monarch is punished for infringing upon the gender order and social norms, the answer to that question becomes rather obvious. The ending of each play leaves the reader with a patriarchal reality in which the female character remains inferior and does not stand a chance of destabilising the male power, and all her endeavours will eventually be thwarted.

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Biogram

Weronika Dziurleja – absolwentka filologii angielskiej studiów pierwszego stopnia; kontynuuje edukację na studiach magisterskich na Uniwersytecie im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu. Jej główne zainteresowania obejmują feminizm, gender studies oraz literaturę.

Weronika Dziurleja holds a bachelor's degree in English and is a postgraduate student at the Faculty of English of Adam Mickiewicz University. Her main topics of interest are feminism, gender studies, and literature.