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## **Grau d'Estudis Anglesos**

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**TÍTOL:** Analysing Limited Female Agency

in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) and *Hamlet* (c. 1600)

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I am overjoyed to dedicate this research paper to the two most important people in my life - my amazing parents. Especially, to my wonderful mother who has always been my biggest supporter and has encouraged me to follow my dreams. I am incredibly grateful for her and feel blessed to have her in my life.

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Thank you so much everyone

Zonia



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**TITLE:** Analysing Limited Female Agency in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) and *Hamlet* (c. 1600)

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper aims to explore the issue of female agency as it is portrayed in two plays by William Shakespeare: namely, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. The study will examine how Shakespeare offers more autonomy and opportunities to the female characters in his comedies as compared to his tragedies. The societal norms of Shakespeare's time were inherently patriarchal, which influenced gender roles and subsequently the treatment of female characters in his plays. To conduct this analysis, this paper will draw from the feminist critical perspectives of scholars such as Marianne Novy (2017), Phyllis Rackin (2005), and Lisa Jardine (1989), among others. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of this subject matter, the paper will also explore the concepts of subversion, resistance, and the female characters' use of "loopholes" (Novy, 2017).

**Key words:** Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, comedy, tragedy, female agency.

**TÍTOL:** Anàlisi de l'agència femenina limitada al *Somni d'una nit d'estiu* de Shakespeare (c. 1595) i *Hamlet* (c. 1600)

**RESUM:**

L'objectiu d'aquest treball és explorar la qüestió de l'agència femenina tal i com es reflecteix en dues obres de William Shakespeare, *Somni una nit d'estiu* i *Hamlet*. L'estudi examinarà com Shakespeare proporciona més autonomia i oportunitats als personatges femenins a les seves comèdies en comparació amb les seves tragèdies. Les normes socials de l'època de Shakespeare eren inherentment patriarcals, cosa que va influir en els rols de gènere i, posteriorment, en el tractament dels personatges femenins a les seves obres. Per dur a terme aquesta anàlisi, aquest article es basarà en les perspectives crítiques feministes d'erudites com Marianne Novy (2017), Phyllis Rackin (2005) i Lisa Jardine (1989), entre d'altres. Per obtenir una comprensió global d'aquest tema, el treball també explorarà els conceptes de subversió, resistència i l'ús de llacunes ("loopholes") (Novy, 2017) per part dels personatges femenins.

**Paraules clau:** Shakespeare, *Somni d'una nit d'estiu*, *Hamlet*, comèdia, tragèdia, agència femenina.

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## **Sustainable Development Goals**

This research paper aims to address the United Nations' logos number four – Quality Education – and number five – Gender Equality – as it seeks to contribute to enhancing the quality of education by reading classical literary works through a gender perspective, while acknowledging that gender inequality remains a significant issue globally even in the twenty-first century. To demonstrate that discrimination against women stems from patriarchal attitudes that took shape at the start of our modern era, this paper analyses two prominent plays by Shakespeare: namely, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. This paper, which falls within the field of theatre studies, critically examines these two plays with a focus on the representation of the female characters. Its primary objective is to promote gender equality by scrutinizing the historical discrimination faced by women. Moreover, the paper aims to contribute to achieving SDG number four by analysing the plays through a gender-based lens, thereby highlighting the necessity of feminism and gender equality in education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is a well-known English playwright, poet, and dramatist. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) is a comedy from the early stage of his writing career. On the other hand, *Hamlet* (c. 1600) is a tragedy that showcases his writing skills and maturity as a writer. The female characters in these plays are devoid of autonomy due to the male-dominated society they live in. Even when they do have some agency, it is limited. This paper seeks to re-examine the female characters' lack of agency as dramatized in these two plays by Shakespeare. This subject matter is quite fascinating as it offers insight into the societal standards, traditions, and practices of the Early Modern era concerning women. My interest in it started during the first year of the degree, when I took a course called Literature in English until the 17th Century. This course offered a panoramic view of English literature from its origins until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it explored a play by Shakespeare in depth; namely, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I enjoyed studying the play and how my teacher, Clara Escoda, taught the course and introduced us to Shakespeare. Later, in the third year of the degree, I took a course titled Shakespeare's Theatre, which provided a new perspective on Shakespeare's works and focused on *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. This course diverged from my previous studies by emphasizing the characters and their behaviours rather than the plot itself. It encouraged me to explore alternative interpretations of the characters and how they could be understood differently. One aspect that particularly fascinated me was the exploration of female characters, which was done from the perspective of feminism. It was a subject that truly captured my attention and left a lasting impression.

Throughout the course of history, both men and women have faced considerable difficulties and discrimination considering societal expectations, norms, customs, and religious practices. However, it is undeniable that women have been subjected to a greater range of oppressive measures than men, often being relegated to the status of mere objects in society. The paper aims to finally determine whether women have a stronger voice and agency in tragedies or in the comedies. It is noteworthy that this subject has been extensively discussed and examined by historians, critics, and scholars. The fact that there has been significant research on this topic indicates its continuing relevance. Nevertheless, there is limited research on the correlation between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* regarding this topic. This paper will show how the structure of the comedy allows for a more extensive exploration of female agency than the tragedy. Lena Cowen Orlin in



her work, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (1994), examines the interplay between the private and public spheres in the lives of women depicted in Shakespeare's dramas. She suggests that female characters from Shakespearean tragedies, such as Gertrude in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello*, show a remarkable degree of personal agency and sway within their respective narratives. While it is true, as Orlin claims, that in some plays women do have agency it is always much more so in the comedies. Therefore, this paper aims to align itself with the view that claims that comedies give a stronger voice to women. In his work, *To Be A Woman: Shakespeare's Patriarchal Viewpoint*, Conley Greer asserts that in Shakespeare's comedies, female characters frequently exhibit a degree of control and generate excitement for the male characters in their pursuit of romantic love. Conversely, in his tragedies and romances, women are portrayed as more complex individuals who engage with deeper philosophical questions (2003, p. 135). This paper aligns itself with this view, because in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (comedy) the female characters, Hermia and Helena, show their strength, expression, and eagerness in their romantic pursuits. Hermia defies her father's order to marry Demetrius, asserting her liberty to choose her own partner, Lysander. Helena relentlessly pursues Demetrius, even when he initially rejects her, showcasing her unwavering resolve and self-assurance.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy that is characterized by its light-hearted tone, romantic aspects and supernatural elements. The play showcases Shakespeare's skill in mixing multiple storylines together and his impeccable comedic timing. On the other hand, *Hamlet* is a tragedy that explores human psychology more deeply than any work in Western literature, as a central point in the play is Hamlet's existential crisis and his internal struggles. Additionally, the play demonstrates Shakespeare's utmost ability when it comes to building character personalities, and the development of Hamlet's complex psychology demonstrates his unrivalled excellence as a writer. The objective of this paper is to examine these two plays, a comedy and a tragedy respectively, and to explore how the topic of limited female agency appears in both genres, noting the differences between how it is dramatized in each.

### 1.1. State of the Question

It seems that most literary critics believe Shakespeare's comedic works grant women greater agency, voice, and prominence than his tragic plays. Marilyn French, in her 1983 book, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* contends that Shakespearean comedies empower women to be more assertive and impactful, in contrast to the tragedies, which present them as more oppressed and victimized. Similarly, Lisa Jardine's 1983 publication *Still Harping on Daughters* suggests that comedies offer female characters the opportunity to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms, while the tragedies tend to reinforce patriarchal structures and frequently depict women suffering due to these constraints. Also, Phyllis Rackin's analysis in *Shakespeare and Women* (2005) reveals that while comedic plays grant women greater freedom and sway, this authority is often limited and contingent on the comedic genre itself. In contrast, tragic plays do not afford the same degree of female empowerment. Similarly, Carol Thomas Neely's work *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (1985) highlights how the playful and imaginative aspects of comedies cultivate an environment where women can briefly assert power and autonomy, unlike the grim and deterministic nature of tragedies, where women's fates are more tragic and constrained. In the same manner, David J. Amelang in his article "Playing gender: toward a Quantitative Comparison of Female roles in Lope de Vega" claims that "both the comedies and the romances prove to be much more hospitable environments for female presence and agency than the tragedies and histories" (2019, p. 122).

Although the predominant belief suggests that women in Shakespeare's comedies are more empowered and tend to have a stronger voice and greater will power when compared to his tragedies, some critics maintain that women in his tragic plays also show power, but in distinct and frequently more intricate manners. For example, in her work *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (1992), Janet Adelman examines how female characters in Shakespearean tragedies, such as Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, exert a profound influence over the male protagonists and the course of events. These women, marked by their power, ambition, and manipulative nature, display a distinct form of agency that differs from the depictions found in the comedies. Similarly, Coppelia Kahn's *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (1981) explores how the suffering and tragic fates of female characters can be interpreted as a manifestation of power. These female characters are victimized yet resilient, and therefore, expose the vulnerabilities and flaws of the male characters and the patriarchal

system, thereby indirectly wielding a form of moral and existential authority. Furthermore, in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999) Harold Bloom argues that female characters in Shakespearean tragedies often play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative. A prime example is Ophelia from *Hamlet*, whose descent into madness and tragic demise are crucial factors in the unfolding of the titular character's story, underscoring the profound influence and importance of the female perspective in these classic works.

This paper aims to contribute to the state of question through shedding light on the matter by contrasting two of Shakespeare's renowned works which, as mentioned, have usually not been analysed together, the comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the tragedy *Hamlet*, with a focus on how the female characters in the comedies tend to enjoy a stronger voice, power, independence and more prominent representation than the women in the tragedies, and to bring it to renewed scholarly attention.

## **1.2. Shakespeare and Feminist criticism**

Over the years, many studies have been conducted on the topic of gender and female agency in Shakespeare's plays. It can be argued that there exist two distinct perspectives on this issue. On the one hand, there are certain critics, such as Juliet Dusinberre, Patricia Gurlay and Phyllis Rackin, who have analysed Shakespeare's work from a feminist perspective and concluded that women in his plays wielded significant power.

In the chapter titled "A Usable History", from *Shakespeare and Women* (2005), Rackin asserts that it is necessary to reexamine and reconsider the role of women in Shakespeare's plays and the society of his period. While women were indeed oppressed in certain aspects of their lives, Rackin argues that it is crucial to recognize that they held diverse roles and that not all women were required to be married. For instance, widows were often named executrix, indicating a degree of power and agency (p. 21). Thus, it is erroneous to merely view women as subordinate to men; rather, they enjoyed certain privileges and influence. Rackin further argues that it is important to develop a feminism that acknowledges the complexity of women's experiences, rather than reducing them to mere victims of oppression. She asserts that projecting our own contemporary perspectives onto the past is inaccurate and that there is a need to adopt a more flexible approach to understanding historical contexts. Furthermore, she states, "The way we read

Shakespeare's plays matters because the cultural prestige of Shakespeare makes his plays a model for contemporary values and the privileged site where past history is reconstructed" (p. 16). In her work *Shakespeare's and the Nature of Women*, Dusinberre claims that Shakespeare viewed men and women as equal despite the prevailing societal norms that declared them unequal (1975, p. 308). Similarly, in her publication "O my most sacred lady": Female Metaphor in *The Winter's Tale* (1975), Gourlay argues that female values ultimately triumph over the prevailing masculine social order.

Contrarily, there are scholars such as Linda Bamber, Marianne Novy and Clara Claiborne Park who posit that Shakespeare cannot be considered a feminist, and that his works portray women holding a restricted level of power. Novy maintains in her work *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory* that it may be challenging to say that Shakespeare was a feminist. Nevertheless, the gaps and silences in his work can direct our attention towards the area of unspoken words and interpret them in a way that resonates with our understanding. She asserts, for instance, that "[i]n Shakespeare's time and society [patriarchy] was certainly dominant, though some women found loopholes" (2017, p. 17). Park, in *As We Like It: How a Girl Can be Smart and Still Popular* (1980), claims that subordination is present even in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Additionally, Bamber expresses in *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* that while Shakespeare may not be classified as a feminist, but he does advocate for women in his works. However, she admits that the prevalent misogyny in Shakespeare's tragedies indicates that he is examining gender relations through a male perspective (Bamber, 1982, p. 4). Bamber expresses that in Shakespeare's comedies, he may not necessarily be a feminist, but he at least takes the woman's side. The female characters in his comedies are often portrayed as more intelligent, self-aware, rational, lively, and happier than their male counterparts (p.2). Even though the range and liveliness of female personalities Shakespeare created is indeed astounding, one must not forget that he was living in deeply patriarchal society which nonetheless also limited the way in which he portrayed them.

While Dusinberre, Gourlay, Rackin and, to a certain extent, Bamber, have argued that Shakespeare gave voice to his female characters and that their roles were diverse, I posit in this paper that women had limited voice and agency and were constrained by societal norms such as marriage and the patriarchal figures in their lives.

### 1.3. Methodology and Chapter Overview

The objective of this paper is to conduct a cultural materialist and feminist analysis of Shakespeare's plays by exploring the concepts of subversion, resistance, and "loopholes" (Novy, 2017, p. 17), which can be defined as the opportunities the female characters seize in order to assert their subjectivity in a strongly patriarchal context. The study aims to examine the power dynamics depicted in his works and will focus on specific scenes from both plays that demonstrate the limited agency of women in Shakespeare's work. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the scenes that will be analysed include Theseus's declaration to marry Hippolyta (Act 1, scene 1), Hermia's father's ultimatum for her to marry Demetrius (Act 1, scene 1), and Helena's expression of her love for Demetrius (Act 1, scene 1), among others. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, the scene in which Gertrude consumes the poisonous wine intended for Hamlet (Act 5, scene 2). The scene in which Ophelia responds to her brother Laertes' efforts to instruct her on how to safeguard her chastity (Act 1, scene 3). Another scene in which Hamlet commands Ophelia to enter a nunnery (Act 3, scene 1), among others.

The subsequent chapter will provide a detailed theoretical background and context of the author. Then, it will provide an overview related to Shakespeare and genre, as well as the exploration of possibility: subversion, resistance, and 'loopholes'. Later, the paper will present two chapters dedicated to the analysis of the plays, one focusing on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the other on *Hamlet*, culminating in a concluding section.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Context of the Author

Shakespeare was a prominent figure during the Elizabethan (1558-1603) and Jacobean (1603-1625) eras. Two main, distinct critical perspectives exist regarding the treatment and status of women in the Early Modern period. According to Hannah Lewis, Elizabethan England was a profoundly patriarchal system that was characterized by rigid gender roles (2021, p. 10). Men were expected to embody traits such as strength, providing for their families, and having a dominant personality. Conversely, women were confined to domestic roles, such as maintaining the household, obeying their husbands, childbearing, and raising them. Alternatively, Rackin asserts that women played a significant role in Shakespeare's time, in terms of both position and influence. She articulates that the influence of women was not confined to their families, as demonstrated by Tudor queens Mary and Elizabeth. Although Elizabeth's position was considered an anomaly, other women wielded political power (2021, p. 20). Additionally, she highlights women held a substantial amount of economic influence, not just through inheritance from their fathers and husbands, but also through their own profitable employment. Women situated lower on the social hierarchy earned their livelihoods not only by working as domestic servants but also by pursuing diverse trades, which required them to work outside their households (2021, p. 21).

As Frances E. Dolan says "[...] marriage was inevitable [...] for women in early modern England. [...] Women are all either married, about to be married, or widowed" (2011, 621). Hence, matrimony served as a tool for the subjugation of women. It is interesting to mention that although legal separations had their issues, surviving church court records indicate that women initiated separation cases more frequently than men. The reasons for separation were based on gender: men commonly accused their wives of committing adultery, while women typically accused their husbands of being cruel (2011, p. 623). Besides, as Dorothea Faith Kehler articulates, "[...] contrary to the tropes of the lusty widow and the widow hunt, in early modern England wealthy widows were not apt to remarry" (2006, p. 27). Also, she claims that "[...] widows [were encouraged] to live as celibates, to epitomize piety, and to devote themselves to safeguarding their children's interests" (2021, p. 21). This paper will study the figures of young women who are to be married in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and of the widow, in *Hamlet*, and these expectations and restrictions will be clearly observed. In the first case, it is crucial to explore how societal norms and pressures impact the experiences of young women,

specifically in relation to their roles as daughters, future wives, and objects of desire. In the second case, it is important to note that Gertrude's status as a widow in *Hamlet* holds considerable implications for her position within the patriarchal society depicted in the play. Her actions and decisions are closely examined and evaluated based on societal expectations surrounding widowhood, thereby underscoring the intricate gender roles and power dynamics portrayed in Shakespeare's works. Therefore, the idea of widows getting married was not viewed positively by society.

### 3. SHAKESPEARE AND GENRE

As stated in the introduction, this paper aims to analyse a comedy and a tragedy in relation to female agency in Shakespeare's works. It is necessary to commence by providing an analysis of how female characters tend to be depicted in these two distinct genres, as this paper will compare the role of female characters in a comedy and a tragedy. Firstly, it is worth noting that during the 16th and 17th centuries, women were expected to adhere to three rules: chastity, silence, and obedience. Any woman who failed to comply with these rules was labelled as unchaste. Even if a woman was talkative or performed on stage, expressing her feelings would automatically associate her with being a prostitute. As Mena Ribic maintains, Shakespeare empowered women in comedies and they played significant roles within the narrative (2021, p. 2-3). Therefore, one may assume that females have some degree of power and articulacy in comedies. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia dresses up as a male lawyer to assist Antonio, demonstrating her intelligence, control and defiance of societal expectations. Similarly, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind is renowned for her sharp tongue and quick wit. However, as Lisa Hopkins states, "[...] all comedies end with a marriage" (1998, p. 133). Thus, comedies tend to end with the reinstatement of the established order that reinforces conventional gender roles and the patriarchal system, as is evident in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. In all these plays, the female character ultimately ends up getting married and capitulating to her spouse. On the other hand, tragedies usually end with death and destruction, as seen in works like *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*. This is because the protagonist typically dies, resulting in a pervasive sense of loss and sorrow. Also, as Kurt E. Wilamowski asserts, "[t]he female characters of Shakespeare's [...] tragedies are destined to suffer a tragic demise, regardless of the actions they may take or the desires of the male protagonists" (1994, p. 3). Nonetheless, Carole McKewin contends that in "tragedies, where the patriarchal world is more oppressive, women are sometimes able to do more, but they talk less to each other" (1980, p. 127). Hence, she maintains that no sisterhood between women is possible in the tragedies, but also holds power and fulfils important roles in them. For instance, in the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra is portrayed as a potent and captivating queen who captures the heart of Mark Antony. Likewise, in *Macbeth*, she is a forceful character who significantly influences her husband, urging him to commit regicide against King Duncan. M. Ribic posits that in many of Shakespeare's plays, women play a pivotal role in driving the plot forward. These women serve as 'catalysts' for the events that occur,



particularly in Shakespeare's tragedies where the reactions of other characters are dependent on the actions of the female characters. Although they are not the main protagonists, their roles are crucial (2021, p. 1-2). This paper will examine how Gertrude, by marrying Claudius, becomes a catalyst for the tragic events that unfold in *Hamlet*. Gertrude is unfairly mistreated and subjected to sexual blame for her actions.

In conclusion, it could be said that there is no binary division between tragedies and comedies regarding female agency. However, many studies have shown that, in comparison to tragedies, women tend to have more voice, representation, role, freedom, and power in comedies generally.

### **3.1. The Exploration of Possibility: Subversion, Resistance, and 'Loopholes'**

This paper places significant emphasis on concepts such as subversion, resistance, and the term loopholes (Novy, 2017, p. 17), which this study will use in order to refer to limited spaces for freedom women often took advantage of. These terms will be invaluable during analysis of the selected case studies, as they pertain to feminist criticism and can provide insight into how women have historically navigated patriarchal systems.

Alan Sinfield's work *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* highlights the importance of challenging prevalent ideologies and power structures in literature and society. Likewise, Jonathan Dollimore, in his book *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, explores resistance as an act of subverting or challenging dominant power structures and ideologies within literature and cultural discourse. Resistance embodies acts of defiance, imparting knowledge of the capacity for individual agency and societal transformation within oppressive environments. These ideas apply to two plays that this study analyses. Both Dollimore and Sinfield employ cultural materialist criticism, which allows for the discussion of concepts such as subversion and resistance, terms which continue to be relevant in today's times. Although there is not an explicit subversion of the hetero-patriarchal laws in the two plays this paper has selected for analysis, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*, "loopholes" (Novy, 2017, p. 17) can certainly be found. Building on Dollimore and Sinfield's cultural materialist approach, Novy defines 'loopholes' as "In many countries today, male supremacy varies between dominant and residual – in Shakespeare's time

and society it was certainly dominant, though some women found loopholes” (2017, p. 17). Indeed, although male supremacy was prevalent during Shakespeare’s era, some women found cracks whenever possible. ‘Loopholes’ refers to mechanisms that individuals use to navigate or undermine existing power structures. This concept will be predominantly examined in relation to Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius and the female characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when they venture into the woods.

To conclude, this paper will adopt cultural materialist and feminist perspectives, to examine whether the female characters, in both *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet*, were genuinely marginalized and deprived of agency or perhaps they possessed independence, advocacy and dominance. Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge that studying the different perspectives and values of women as they are portrayed in literature and drama is ever more urgent and relevant if one considers the present-day reality, dominated by a return of extreme and chauvinistic attitudes toward women. This is evidenced by figures such as Donald Trump, and events such as the rise of the far right in many European countries, all of which advocate for traditional gender roles and deny women’s agency as agential individuals.

## 4. ANALYSIS OF THE PLAYS

The upcoming chapter will provide a comprehensive analysis of the female characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* with respect to their agency and freedom to pursue their desires. The chapter, titled Analysis of the Plays, is divided into two distinct sub-sections, one dedicated to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the other one to *Hamlet*. The subsection on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features the following subsections: Women in Power, which discusses the character of Hippolyta; and The Situation of Young Girls, which focuses on Helena and Hermia. Through this analysis, the paper will try to elucidate why the female characters have greater agency in Shakespearean comedies than in the tragedies.

### 4.1. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

#### 4.1.2. Preliminaries: Women in the Comedies

This subchapter will present a brief overview of how women are represented in Shakespearean comedy, by taking *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing* as examples, with the aim that they may work as a framework for the analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the next subchapter.

As stated in the introduction, the genre of comedy tends to be more empowering for women when compared to tragedy. This is because, in comedy, female characters are given greater agency, authority and emancipation, allowing them to take control of their own lives (Bamber, 1982, p. 4). Consequently, Shakespeare's comedies often portray women as proactive, intelligent, and capable of shaping their own futures, in contrast to their more limited roles in his tragedies. Rosalind, the main female character in *As You Like It*, is a perfect example of a strong female character. She takes charge of her life by disguising herself as a man named Ganymede. For example, upon being banished from court by Duke Frederick, Rosalind decides to adopt a male guise, Ganymede, in order to ensure her safety and autonomy.

At the end of the play, Rosalind, who is disguised as the character Ganymede, orchestrates the resolution of the various romantic entanglements occurring within the Forest of Arden. When addressing Duke Frederick, Orlando, and Phoebe, Rosalind asserts her autonomy and control over her own destiny. She declares that she will not acknowledge Duke Frederick as a father, Orlando as a husband, or Phoebe as a wife,

unless certain conditions are met. This showcases Rosalind's agency and her determination to navigate matters of love and relationships on her own terms. For example, she articulates, "[to Duke] I'll have no father, if you be not he. / [To Orlando.] I'll have no husband, if you be not he, / [To Phoebe.] Nor ne'er wed woman, if you be not she" (Shakespeare, 2009, 5.4. 126-129). This choice is a testament to her ingenuity and steadfast resolve to govern her own destiny. Also, with her intelligence and wit, Rosalind adeptly manages the complexities of love and relationships, ultimately charting her own course toward happiness. As Nila Akhtar Khan aptly puts it, "Shakespeare's comedies present a more nuanced and empowering view of women compared to his tragedies. Through characters like Viola, Beatrice, and Hermia, Shakespeare challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes, presenting women as intelligent, independent, and capable individuals" (2024, p. 148). Moreover, in the *Twelfth Night* the character of Viola adopts the persona of a man named Cesario, which allows her to behave in ways that were previously unimaginable for a woman. For instance, Viola's ability to assume a male identity allows her the opportunity to engage in employment, express her views openly, enjoy greater physical safety, and experience enhanced social mobility. Viola's shrewdness and resourcefulness prove essential in resolving the romantic entanglements that arise throughout the play. This notion is further supported by Albay, who posits that female characters in comedic works experience heightened agency through the outcomes of the plot (2021, p. 279). While it is true that comedies allow the female characters greater flexibility to play with their identities, it is also the fact that in comedic plays, women also lack agency, voice and independence. For instance, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina is initially portrayed as a strong-willed woman. However, she is subjected to Petruchio's attempts to 'tame' her through psychological manipulation and domination. In the end, she appears to have conformed to the subordinate role expected of her. Similarly, in *Much Ado About Nothing* the character of Hero experiences public shame and humiliation at her own wedding due to false accusations of infidelity made by Claudio. Her reputation and ability to act independently are heavily compromised by the men in her life, and she must rely on a plan devised by others to regain her status. In the play, during the wedding ceremony, the character of Hero has been publicly accused of being unfaithful to her betrothed. Claudio, who has been misled by the machinations of the villainous Don John, asserts that he has observed Hero in the company of another individual. This erroneous understanding, which stems from the actions of Hero's maidservant, Margaret, and Borachio, prompts Claudio to publicly renounce Hero,

thereby subjecting her to public disgrace and humiliation. For instance, Claudio utters, “There, Leonato, take her back again. Give not this rotten orange to your friend. She’s but the sign and semblance of her honour. Behold how like a maid she blushes here!” (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1.31-34). The public accusation destroys Hero’s reputation, rendering her vulnerable and embarrassed. The false accusation was orchestrated by Don John with the intention of destroying the relationship between Hero and Claudio. This excerpt demonstrates the lack of respect for women and their objectification in society. Later, Leonato, the father of Hero, initially accepted the accusations and responded with anger and embarrassment. He even expressed a desire for her demise to prevent the dishonour. He expresses:

Do not live, Hero; do not open thine eyes:  
For, did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,  
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames,  
Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches,  
Strike at thy life. Grieved I, I had but one?  
Chide I for that at frugal nature’s frame?  
O, one too much by thee! Why had I one?  
Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes? (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1.131-138)

The statement indicates that a woman’s entire being was dependent on her honour and virtue. However, it can be contended that although there is evidence of control and oppression, Shakespeare’s comedic works often provide female characters the chance to display their intelligence, courage, and independence, leading to more favourable resolutions than in his tragedies. In this regard, as Tingting Tan argues, “In comedies, women display greater self-awareness and actively pursue self-expression, while in tragedies, they often assume more submissive roles, influenced by male counterparts” (2024, p. 656). Apart from this, it is interesting to note, as Greer clarifies, that “[t]he women of Shakespeare’s comedies are, to some degree, in control and make life interesting for their male counterparts in the quest for love. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s tragedies and romances reveal women to be much more complex creatures involved in greater philosophical struggles” (2003, p. 135). The claim appears to be accurate, as the objective of this research paper is to demonstrate how women in Shakespeare’s comedies possess control and influence in the pursuit of love, whereas in

tragedies and romances, they are depicted as engaging in more profound philosophical conflicts.

#### **4.1.3. Comedy: Women in Power**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, like *As You Like It* and other comedies by Shakespeare, presents the opposition between the city – Athens in this case – and a parallel world, the woods, which works is used in the play in order to explore possibilities for women. This subsection will concern itself with the analysis of Hippolyta, Theseus's wife to be, in order to explore what was the situation of women who, in principle, had a powerful position.

Having in mind the quote by Gray Day, where he claims that “Differences between tragedy and comedy are easy to spot. Tragedy ends in death, and comedy in marriage; tragedy focuses on the high-born, and comedy on the low-born; tragedy focuses on the individual, and comedy on the community” (p. 11), it can be seen that the genre of comedy is quite adaptable, something which might allow the women a degree of agency. Unlike in tragedy, women's endings in comedy are not death but rather a resolution, often in the form of marriage. This subsection will address the character of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, who is engaged to Theseus, the Duke of Athens. The aim of this section is to explore the ambivalence in the character of Hippolyta, whereby she can be perceived as a woman who embodies traits of strength, independence, and resilience, while it can also be argued that she is silenced and controlled against her will, as she is obligated to obey her future husband Theseus since she was presented to him as a gift of war and pledged to him. This power dynamic places her in a subordinate position, as her union with Theseus is a direct consequence of his victory in battle over her.

Although Shakespeare does not explicitly depict Hippolyta's backstory in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is apparent that she possesses one. Prior to the events of the play, Hippolyta held a significant position as a warrior queen who led the Amazons, a group of formidable female warriors. She was renowned for her courage and combat prowess. However, following her defeat by Theseus, she was taken into captivity and transported to Athens. Despite her captivity, Hippolyta refused to allow her circumstances to define her and maintained her strength and dignity. Theseus fell in love with her and proposed marriage. Hippolyta accepted the relationship with Theseus, as it was perhaps the only way to bring stability and harmony to her life. Notwithstanding, as Qingyu Xiao

claims, “In the Greek system of life, Hippolyta is portrayed as far more powerful and forceful than she is shown in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (2022, p. 171).

The character of Hippolyta is susceptible to divergent interpretations. One perspective posits her as a compliant and deferential prospective spouse. This notion is evidenced in Act 4, scene 1, wherein Theseus dismisses the lovers’ narrations of their experiences within the enchanted forest. In this instance, Hippolyta’s response to Theseus’ assertion is one of silence, which may be construed as a moment wherein her voice is suppressed or controlled by the authority Theseus exercises. This implies a potential acquiescence to his scepticism, notwithstanding her refraining from directly voicing her disagreement. Conversely, however, Hippolyta can also be considered to speak her mind to Theseus and to gain her power back by Act 5 (Dana and Wis, 2000, p. 26). In the Act V, Hippolyta says: “But all the story of the night told over, / And all their minds transfigured so together, / More witnesseth than fancy’s images / And grows to something of great constancy, but, howsoever, strange and admirable” (Shakespeare, 2009, 5.1. 24-28). This speech functions to validate the subjective experiences of the lovers, underscoring the transformative essence of amorous affection and the authenticity of their emotive expressions. In executing this, Hippolyta pronounces her own perspectival stance and challenges the authoritative position of Theseus, thereby manifesting her assertiveness and autonomy. Her refusal to be subjugated by Theseus’s conquest showcases a remarkable strength of character and an unwillingness to relinquish her own agency and self-worth. For instance, in Act 5, Hippolyta is seeking to have an influence on Theseus regarding what has happened with the lovers during the night. She wants to believe them, since women seem to be more ready to believe in fairies, more connected to the world of the unconscious than men, who, like Theseus, praises rationality and only uses rationality as a means to read the world. She also seems to want to believe the lovers because she wants the women to be able to decide who to marry, she doesn’t want Theseus to punish them. Hippolyta articulates: “But all the story of the night told over, / And all their minds transfigured so together, / More witnesseth than fancy’s images / And grows to something of great constancy / But, howsoever, strange and admirable” (Shakespeare, 2009, 5.1. 24-28). This scene highlights her sceptical viewpoint, indicating her intellectual capacity and vocal presence. Furthermore, when the four lovers, Hippolyta and Theseus are watching the play by the artisans. This view of Hippolyta as independent and empowered opposes the societal constraints of the play’s setting and serves as a notable commentary on gender dynamics and the potential for individual resistance

against the confines of patriarchal society. Hippolyta expresses, “This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard” but Theseus answers her, “The best in this kind are but shadows, and / the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them” and she replies “It must be your imagination, then, and not / theirs” (Shakespeare, 2009, 5.1. 23-27). In this scene, Hippolyta's tendency to express her opinions and her implicit challenge to Theseus's perception demonstrate a level of independence and self-reliance. This indicates that she is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in the dialogue.

It can be observed that Hippolyta has a minimal presence in the play. In this light, Novy argues, “silence can mean many different things” and she further claims “... [silence] can be seen as resistance to tyranny” (2017, p. 118-119). Novy posits that the reticence and omissions of the female characters can be construed as a form of resistance against the patriarchal system. To illustrate, during the scene where Theseus passes a sentence on Hermia, commanding her to either face death, live as a nun, or marry Demetrius, Hippolyta is present, and she displays a facial expression that implies her discontent with this ruling and the laws of Athens. Hippolyta exhibits empathy for Hermia as a fellow woman at this juncture. This information is possible through Theseus's comment only. He says: “what cheer, my love?” (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1. 124). Shakespeare subtly presents female subversion within his work, incorporating it as an almost imperceptible detail. However, the inclusion of such a nuanced element is highly significant.

The opening scene of the play depicts Hippolyta as a subjugated figure within the patriarchal social structure she occupies. As the conquered queen, she is forced to enter matrimony with Theseus, a circumstance that symbolizes her lack of personal agency and autonomy. Throughout the play, Hippolyta's perspective and agency are subordinated to the male characters, who dominate the narrative and regulate the social order. Her limited lines and diminished presence on stage reflect the patriarchal structures that confine and constrain her within the prevailing social and cultural framework. This portrayal illustrates the marginalization and oppression experienced by Hippolyta, who is compelled to adhere to the expectations and dictates of the male-centric society depicted in the play. Theseus's discussion of their marriage further highlights his dominance within their relationship, as evidenced by his authoritative statements: “Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries, / But I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling” (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1.



17-20). This passage states that Hippolyta's marriage to Theseus may be more about conquest and submission than reciprocity or mutual love. According to Anne Pino, "Theseus can own Hippolyta, legally and sexually, through marriage because with marriage comes the ability to have intercourse without social repercussions" (2021, p. 7). Throughout the entirety of the play, it is evident that Hippolyta has little to no say in the decision-making processes concerning her wedding or any other matters involving the court. This serves to highlight her passive and submissive role within the relationship. In this manner, as Pauline Durin contends, "By abusing [Hippolyta], Theseus showed his power over the embodiment of a female-centred society in order to make patriarchy triumph instead" (2018, p. 30).

#### **4.1.4. The Situation of Young Girls**

According to Meera Mohanty, "[w]omen in Shakespearean comedies [...] enjoyed greater autonomy and personal power than one would expect in a patriarchal society of the time" (2012, p. 105-6). Having this in mind, the subsequent subsection will analyse the characters of Hermia and Helena, two young girls who reside in the same strongly patriarchal society as Hippolyta. Starting with Hermia and then continuing with Helena, the analysis will explore how both women can be interpreted in two distinct ways; they can both be viewed as empowered and autonomous women, as demonstrated by Hermia's declaration of love for Lysander or Helena's determination and resilience to marry Demetrius, or as vulnerable, lacking in decision-making power, and submissive, such as when Hermia is ordered to marry Lysander by her father, or when Helena is threatened with rape by Lysander. This paper, however, will support the notion that the comedic structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes it possible to make a reading of the play as endorsing women's rights and subversion of the established patriarchal system.

In *The Second Sex*, and albeit speaking from and about a different context, that of the 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir discusses the situation of married women, and alerts that "Marriage is traditionally the destiny offered to women by society. Most women are married or have been, or plan to be or suffer from not being" (1949, p. 221). If, according to De Beauvoir, it was difficult to break free from social expectations regarding marriage in the context of the 50s, it was even more difficult in Shakespeare's Early Modern period, when it was the means of economic survivability for many women. In the Early Modern period women did not have the freedom to choose marriage, or even choose who to marry, and it was a predetermined 'fate' imposed upon them by societal norms meant to ensure

the continuity of a patriarchal society. De Beauvoir also interestingly contends that marriage is not a union between two individuals, but rather a contractual agreement between the father of the bride and the son-in-law. As women have historically been viewed as the property of their fathers, marriage only occurs when both parties have agreed to a contract. The theory presented by De Beauvoir can be applied to the situation Hermia undergoes, since the father seeks to control who she has to marry. It can also be applied to both Hermia and Helena, since both seem to be obsessed with the need to marry. Nevertheless, even if they were to marry the men they love (Hermia with Lysander and Helena with Demetrius), it would not necessarily be a victory for them as women. This is due to the fact that they are living in a society where marriage is a social norm for women that entails very predetermined and fixed roles for each gender, and they are expected to adhere to them. Indeed, as will be seen in the play, for women it entailed the need to be submissive to the husband's superior will, as well as to adhere to the three 'golden' rules for women; namely, to be chaste, obedient, and modest of speech. In order to prove their chastity, women had to prove they were modest of speech and obedient through life. Furthermore, there was an automatic link between the three rules, whereby a failure in obedience or silence automatically meant unchastity, and therefore, women's behaviour was severely restricted. Consequently, and in sum, whether it was a love marriage or an arranged one, women were subject to prejudice and control. In an ideal society, marriage ought to be a choice rather than an obligation.

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the character of Hermia experiences oppression and control primarily through the demands of her father, Egeus, and the societal expectations placed upon her. Egeus insists that Hermia must marry Demetrius, despite her own desires, and threatens her with death or lifelong celibacy if she disobeys. This lack of autonomy over her own love life illustrates the oppressive nature of patriarchal authority, where women's choices are dictated by male figures. The characterization of Hermia can be observed as that of a woman who is feeble, weak, and silenced, as her father is exerting pressure on her to marry the man of his choice. As Mimouna Zitouni states, "Egeus acts irrationally, obsessed only with preserving his dominance over Hermia, even if that means sacrificing her well-being" (2020, p. 121). Egeus's authoritative stance is evident in his declaration:

With cunning hast thou filched my daughter's heart,  
Turned her obedience (which is due to me)  
To stubborn harshness. —And, my gracious duke,

Be it so she will not here before your Grace  
Consent to marry with Demetrius,  
I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:  
As she is mine, I may dispose of her,  
Which shall be either to this gentleman  
Or to her death, according to our law  
Immediately provided in that case (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1. 37-46)

In this scene, it is evident that Hermia, being female, is subjected to the authority of her traditional father. Egeus implores the duke to uphold the laws of Athens, which grant him the power to determine Hermia's destiny. Essentially, Hermia is left with no alternative but to either marry Demetrius or face the penalty of death. Consequently, Hermia has no control over her own life or the person she wishes to marry, as this right is exclusively bestowed upon the father of the daughter in Athens. In this regard, Yalçın Erden claims that "Egeus underlines that Hermia is his possession and limits her choices by using his patriarchal power as a father. [...] Through Egeus's attitude, Theseus's statements, and Hermia's helplessness, Shakespeare reveals what patriarchy, or the rule of the father means (2024, p. 14). Additionally, another instance from the text serves as proof that the Athenian community displays prejudice towards women, who are prohibited from expressing their wants or desires. Theseus gives Hermia a simple choice between becoming a nun, or death:

Either to die the death or to abjure  
Forever the society of men.  
Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires,  
Know of your youth, examine well your blood,  
Whether (if you yield not to your father's choice)  
You can endure the livery of a nun,  
For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,  
To live a barren sister all your life,  
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.  
Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood  
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage,  
But earthlier happy is the rose distilled  
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,

Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1. 67-80)

According to Athenian law, if Hermia refuses to marry the man her father has chosen for her (Demetrius), she must either live as a nun or face death. Therefore, it is made clear that her sexuality as a woman is subjected to male control and owned by men.

The character of Hermia, however, can also be interpreted as resilient, independent, and intelligent. She exhibits a degree of independence within the patriarchal society depicted in the work. Despite facing immense pressure from her father to marry Demetrius, a suitor of his choosing, Hermia resolutely vocalizes her own desires and chooses to pursue her love for Lysander instead. In this regard, Ana Hening Kusuma posits that “[i]n *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, through characters of women such as Hermia and Helena, Shakespeare has shown that women can also struggle by having courage to actively act against men’s domination” (2017, p. 133). Indeed, this paper asserts that, through this defiant act, the play asserts Hermia’s personhood and questions patriarchy as a valid ‘text’ to read and control women. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a comedy, furthermore, this will enable Shakespeare to keep Hermia’s defiance for longer than if it had been a tragedy, something which proves the greater potential of comedy to upturn the status quo regarding women’s oppression.

Such defiance shows Hermia’s autonomy and determination, as she refuses to conform to the traditional gender roles and societal expectations of her time. When Egeus informs her of the consequences of not marrying according to her father’s wishes, which, as mentioned, include becoming a nun or facing death, Hermia responds with remarkable fortitude and conviction: “So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, / Ere I will yield my virgin patent up / Unto his Lordship whose unwished yoke / My soul consents not to give sovereignty” (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1. 60-66). This demonstrates her unwavering determination and resolve. She chooses to lead a life of celibacy and death over submitting herself to a man whom she does not wish to marry. This exemplifies her strong determination and fervent desire for self-governance and autonomy over her own life and decisions. Mingyuan Wu states that “[...] Hermia faced the arrangements and expectations of her family and society for her marriage. However, she did not passively accept this arrangement but dared to challenge traditional marriage concepts and social expectations. Her behaviour reflects women’s resistance to society’s positioning and restrictions on women’s roles and also echoes feminism’s call to get rid of traditional

constraints” (2014, p. 25). In this light, when Hermia becomes aware that her father and the Athenian law prohibit her from marrying the man she loves, Lysander, she chooses to elope to follow her heart and desires, thereby challenging Athenian society. In her own words:

Take comfort: he no more shall see my face.  
Lysander and myself will fly this place.  
Before the time I did Lysander see  
Seemed Athens as a paradise to me.  
O, then, what graces in my love do dwell  
That he hath turned a heaven unto a hell! (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1. 207-212)

Thus, Hermia demonstrates her determination and courage by deciding to flee Athens with Lysander and by expressing her perspective of Athens as well as her willingness to take assertive actions to pursue her own happiness.

Turning now to the character of Helena, she is depicted as an individual who is oppressed, controlled, and devoid of power as a young woman within the confines of Athenian society - and therefore as especially vulnerable – and she is an important means for the play to express the disdain for women that characterises Athens/Early modern England. During the play, she relentlessly pursues Demetrius, who persistently rejects and mistreats her. Helena appears to lack a pronounced sense of personal agency, repeatedly beseeching Demetrius for his affection despite his harsh and demeaning treatment of her. Additionally, Helena faces societal expectations and ridicule, which serve to undermine her self-worth and independence. The portrayal of Helena presents her as a woman restricted by the societal norms of a sexist environment, with her power seemingly limited. For example, Demetrius constantly berates her for having left on her own to the woods, suggesting that rape and male violence are the only possibilities that surely await the young girl:

You do impeach your modesty too much  
To leave the city and commit yourself  
Into the hands of one that loves you not,  
To trust the opportunity of night  
And the ill counsel of a desert place  
With the rich worth of your virginity (Shakespeare, 2009, 2.1. 221-226)

The passage also highlights the significant emphasis placed on a young woman's virtue, and which she had to demonstrate by keeping her modesty and virginity above all, as has been seen with Ophelia. Another instance from the play more evidently suggests the threat of male violence and rape could be a reality for young women. Indeed, Demetrius threatens Helena that he will, "not stay thy questions. Let me go, / Or if thou follow me, do not believe / But I shall do thee mischief in the wood." (Shakespeare, 2009, 2.1. 242-244). This excerpt reveals the power dynamics between Demetrius and Helena and illustrates the vulnerabilities and lack of agency experienced by women within a patriarchal social structure. Demetrius shows a dismissive attitude towards Helena's concerns and resorts to threats to rape her if she persists in pursuing him. This dynamic shows the imbalance of power and the precarious position of women in such a societal context. The quote not only demonstrates the lack of autonomy and freedom experienced by women, but also highlights the threat of sexual violence to Hermia by Demetrius.

In the play, however, Helena also exemplifies the attributes of independence, power, and outspokenness. Her independence is manifested in her autonomous decision-making and self-directed life trajectory. She embodies power through her resilience and unwavering determination, proactively confronting challenges without hesitation or retreat. Helena's outspokenness is evidenced in her fearless expression of her thoughts and emotions, communicating her ideas and advocating for herself and others without apprehension of judgment or consequence. Collectively, these characteristics contribute to Helena's strength and compelling presence as a character. According to Regina Buccola, "Both [Helena] and Hermia wed the men they desire, and female characters triumph over patriarchally mandated social and religious behaviour" (2009, p. 27). In this sense, the character of Helena can also be seen as independent, proactive, and determined in her love for Demetrius, despite his complete disrespect for her. For instance, when Demetrius instructs Helena to cease following him, she firmly responds:

And even for that do I love you the more  
I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,  
The more you beat me I will fawn on you.  
Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,  
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave  
(Unworthy as I am) to follow you.  
What worser place can I beg in your love  
(And yet a place of high respect with me)

Than to be used as you use your dog? (Shakespeare, 2009, 2.1. 209-217)

Even while the scene uncannily suggests women are attracted to violent men and asks questions about the structure of female desire in patriarchal societies, it can also be read more positively, as an attempt to demonstrate Helena's determination to reclaim Demetrius's affections, which reflects her independence and autonomy. As Deniz Can expresses, "[Helena] as a female character [...] is very powerful. Even today women hesitate to open their heart to the men, in society there is a general assumption that the men are the ones to chase. But Helena is so deeply in love that she breaks the social norms and openly reveals her love" (2017, p. 58). Helena actively pursues Demetrius, challenging the societal expectations of passive female behaviour. In doing so, she asserts her agency in a society that tends to suppress and silence the voices of women. Helena can be considered a powerful woman, as she acknowledges the potential difficulties her relationship with Demetrius may face in Athens, as well as those brought by Demetrius's own initial disapproval. Nonetheless, Helena remains steadfast and fights for what she desires, which is to marry Demetrius - even if her desires conform to the social expectations patriarchy has built for women, and marriage is the main form of female control. By engaging in this deliberate act, she aligns her actions with her own personal desires, rather than conforming to societal norms. According to Emma Drever, "Helena ventures into uncharted territory to write her role as the wooing woman, which is why she moves the action into the lawless land of the forest. She cannot be controlled by Athenian law or the men that uphold it, so she must move to break free" (2020, p. 9). Moreover, Helena courageously keeps asserting her desires: "The wildest hath not such a heart as you. / Run when you will. The story shall be changed: / Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase; / The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind" (Shakespeare, 2009, 2.1. 236-239). She appears to be guided by her emotions and personal convictions, rather than external pressures or societal expectations. Notwithstanding, Stephanie Chamberlain argues that "While Hermia certainly gets her man by play's end, I'm not certain that she truly gains control over her body. It may well be argued that none of the female characters assumes sexual sovereignty. The defeated Hippolyta is claimed in marriage by her conqueror. [...] Helena is restored to Demetrius. [...] Patriarchy, in fact, seems alive and well by play's end" (2011, p.37). Therefore, by entering the marriage institution, the two female characters in the play, despite achieving their romantic aspirations, ultimately fail to achieve true autonomy over their bodies and remain subject to patriarchal control.



The play portrays two parallel universes that are completely opposite to one another: Athens and the woods. Athens symbolizes a regulated society that is governed by reason and authority, where law and order are the highest values. In contrast, the woods represent a mystical and chaotic realm of independence, where the characters can explore their desires and true selves without the restrictions of society. According to Laurel Moffatt, “for the lovers, the woods represent an escape from Athens and, hence, from the certainties and constraints of the sharp Athenian law” (2004, p. 182). However, men continue to be violent in the woods, whereas for women, this contact with nature, the unconscious, and an unregulated space helps them become more in touch with their own desires and agency.

The friendship shared between Hermia and Helena serves as an illustration of the existence of loopholes for these two women. This is something Helena herself intimates when she claims that both she and Hermia:

Grew together  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition,  
Two lovely berries molded on one stem;  
So with two seeming bodies but one heart,  
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,  
Due but to one, and crowned with one crest (Shakespeare, 2009, 3.2. 213-219)

This scene portrays a profound and unbreakable connection between female friends, comparing their friendship to that of a double cherry that appears as two distinct fruits but is in fact joined together, signifying unity despite outward separation. This unity is what the normative heterosexuality demanded by marriage breaks, yet Helena, in the woods, is freer to voice the possibility of alternative forms of being for women, and of female identity. The woods, then, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* structurally work as a ‘loophole’, using Novy’s words, to explore other possibilities for women, even if they come to a closure in Act 5. In the woods, Hermia and Helena appear to be more candid and unbridled in an environment free from the influence of the misogynistic Athenian society. Moreover, the play exhibits fluidity of desire and queerness between Hermia and



Helena.<sup>1</sup> The portrayals of female companionship that appear in the play, although made in the sidelines, compromise the dominant idea, in Athens, that matrimony of the two women with their respective partners is the most natural or viable option for the women. The Act 5 of the play could be interpreted as an ongoing subversion through the playful and chaotic events in the forest, suggesting that the female characters, maintain a degree of independence and spirit even within the established societal norms. Furthermore, the genre of comedy may provide a platform for women to express their voices more consistently.

To sum up, the analysis suggests that despite the oppression and control faced by the female characters such as Hippolyta, Hermia, and Helena, the genre of the play (comedy) and its structural elements allows these women a greater degree of power, voice, and freedom in comparison to the female characters in the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

## **4. 2. *Hamlet***

### **4.2.1. Preliminaries**

As previously stated in the theoretical background section, tragedies often disempower women by portraying them as vulnerable, oppressed, victimized, and ultimately leading to their death. For instance, in *King Lear*, the female characters such as Cordelia, Goneril and Regan all meet their demise and are subjugated and restricted by the play. However, women do have a voice and hold power in tragedies, although their fate is tragic and controlled by the sexist and homosocial system. It is therefore essential to note women serve as catalysts in Shakespeare's plays, particularly in his tragedies, where their actions drive the plot. Desdemona in *Othello* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* exemplify this role in their respective plays. Despite their contrasting personalities, both women have similar roles. Desdemona assumes a stereotypically feminine persona after marrying Othello, which ultimately leads to her downfall. In Shakespeare's plays, Desdemona and Lady

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<sup>1</sup> For a queer reading of Hermia's and Helena's relationship, see M. Bancu and G. Latre (2019), who explain that "the fact that Hermia confesses to Helena about eloping with Lysander could be an indicator that she wants her friend to stop her and prove her love" (2019, p. 14). They also claim that Hermia's comment – "Godspeed, fair Helena. Whither away?" (Shakespeare, 2009, 1.1. 183) – when Helena seeks to leave in Act I (contextualise the scene) is an indicator of their profound connection. Eva Dalmaijer also explains that "Helena's identity [can be seen] as fluid. Or rather, she wishes for a fluid identity" (2019, p. 11).

Macbeth are two significant female characters who challenge traditional gender roles. Desdemona is portrayed as a virtuous and loyal wife, but her death is caused by her submissive nature. Contrarily, Lady Macbeth defies traditional gender roles by manipulating her husband and acting like a man to achieve her own goals. It is noteworthy to highlight the aspect that social pressures surrounding women ultimately cause their demise. Lady Macbeth employs her husband to achieve her own aspirations because women lacked any political power or voice during that era. Ultimately, she loses her sanity due to overwhelming guilt. Had she possessed more political influence, she may not have resorted to regicide to exert her influence. Similarly, in Desdemona's case, it is misogynistic forces that lead to her sudden death. Despite her submission, her husband disregards her opinions as she is 'merely a woman'. Therefore, Shakespeare may be demonstrating the limitations imposed on women in both tragedies. Whether they are rebellious or subservient, the forces acting against them ultimately lead to their downfall. Shakespeare uses these two characters to experiment with gender roles and criticize Elizabethan society's views of women. Therefore, his female characters become subtle critics of the traditional gender norms prevalent in society during that time (Amy Tesch, 2011, p. 1). It should be noted, however, that these female characters are not the protagonists of the story, and their voices are often marginalized. Thus, the female characters are not the central figures of the narrative, and their perspective is limited. However, even though they are not the protagonists they work as catalysts of the action, and this is a vital role.

Although Shakespeare discusses modern ideas, such as the intricacies of human nature, the struggle for power, interracial love (as seen in *Othello*), and a widow's remarriage (as seen in *Hamlet*), his concepts are far ahead of his time and society. This is because the prevailing mindset of the people was sexist, and as a result, these ideas were co-opted and nullified by the patriarchal society. The tragedies depicted in Shakespeare's plays serve to illustrate that these ideas were not accepted. For instance, Emilia, a character in *Othello*, is a progressive figure as she advocates for women's rights and espouses proto-feminist ideals. In Act 5, she defies the laws of modesty of speech and obedience by speaking out when Iago orders her to be quiet. When Iago commands her to return home, Emilia retorts, "Let heaven and men, the devils, let them all, / All, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (Shakespeare, 2018, 5.2. 219-20). However, her bold and expressive demeanour ultimately results in her demise in Act 5 of the play. The author

presents women as the driving force behind the story. Nevertheless, he depicts them as feeble and submissive. Put differently, he illustrates that if women exceed their limits (if they are not passive, faithful, and domestic), they will face a tragic and fatal fate.

Regarding the tragedy being studied in this research paper, *Hamlet*, the concept of catalyst is particularly evident in the actions of Gertrude and Ophelia, as they serve as the triggering elements for a portion of the tragedy. As outlined in the theoretical framework, women in the genre of tragedy are frequently portrayed as having less agency due to societal norms and patriarchal oppression, leading to their inevitable tragic outcomes (Wilamowski, 1994, p. 3).

#### **4.2. 2. Tragedy: Women in Power**

Taking Neslihan G. Abay's words that tragedies tend to reinforce the stereotypes of gender roles, this chapter shares Abay's view that "Shakespeare's comedies challenge traditional gender stereotypes, while his tragedies tend to reinforce them" (2021, p. 275). This claim appears to be accurate, as Shakespearean tragedies typically reinforce prevalent gender stereotypes. Male characters are often portrayed as powerful and decisive, while female characters are frequently depicted as passive and submissive. For instance, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* is depicted in a manner that shows her ambition in a negative light. This narrative choice serves to reinforce the social stereotype that women are morally inferior when compared to their male counterparts. In this subchapter, the character of Gertrude will be used to demonstrate the claim made by Abay regarding the tendency of tragedies to reinforce stereotypical gender roles. This subsection will analyse Gertrude's position as a female authority figure in a society that is deeply patriarchal and misogynistic. It will explore how she is expected to conform to traditional gender roles and discuss the need to separate male-centric views from the analysis of her character. The aim of this paper is to detach Gertrude's personality from the way it has traditionally been assessed, that is, in connection with sexual guilt and with an excessive, disorderly sexuality, by examining her actions and words.

From the very beginning of the play, it is evident that *Hamlet* is heavily focused on male characters and their perspective. Throughout the play, only two women, namely Gertrude and Ophelia, are present. While Gertrude possesses a certain degree of influence,

as she holds political power in the play, Ophelia does not wield any type of power. Gertrude, who is the Queen of Denmark and the mother of Hamlet, embodies the complex experiences of a woman in a society that is dominated by men. The character of Gertrude can be viewed from two contrasting angles. On the one hand, she presents herself as a strong and autonomous woman who makes her own decisions. However, on the other hand, she can also be perceived as a passive figure who is controlled by the men in her life, such as Claudius and Hamlet.

Gertrude can be perceived as a self-sufficient and formidable female in certain instances of the play. For example, when she gets married to Claudius, she possesses the ability to endanger Hamlet's entitlement to the throne, considering that the matrimony of Gertrude with Claudius can alter the order of succession to the throne. If Hamlet does not get married and have children, and Gertrude and Claudius's union produces an heir, the throne shall be inherited by Claudius's progeny, not Hamlet. Hence, Gertrude holds a position of influence and her choice to remarry has significant ramifications, particularly for her son. In this connection, Emily Graf argues that "[i]t almost seems strange that women could potentially have such a powerful part in inheritance" (2013, p. 27). Since she is the Queen, even if only a dowager queen, she has power, and she uses that power to get married and she refuses to fulfil the responsibilities traditionally ascribed to a mother.<sup>2</sup> During that era, the definition of a mother was contingent upon patriarchal linear descent and was regarded as the guardian of the lineage bearers (Jardine, 1989, p. 81). However, her decision to remarry, particularly to her late husband's brother, incites Hamlet's fury as it ultimately excludes him from the line of succession. Despite this, it is important to note that Gertrude is simply exercising her sexuality and making use of the limited autonomy that was available to her at that moment. This situation certainly enables Shakespeare to scrutinize society's attitude concerning the matter of women's freedom, and towards women who held power. Accordingly, as M. Ayub Jajja argues that

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<sup>2</sup> The title of queen dowager is given to a queen consort who becomes widowed after her husband, the king, dies. The term 'dowager' indicates that she was married to the previous monarch but is now a widow and no longer holds the position of queen consort. However, she still receives certain privileges and honours as the former king's widow, including a special status within the royal family and potentially an advisory role in state affairs. In essence, a queen dowager is the opposite of a queen regnant, like Elisabeth I. According to Tracey A. Sowerby's argument, queen dowagers wielded power and influence in various ways. As significant benefactors and landowners, some even became prominent figures in ecclesiastical circles through their religious patronage (Sowerby, 2021, p. 1).

“Shakespearean tragedies perpetuate and reinforce the patriarchy and patriarchal values and women are presented as lesser beings” (2014, p. 236).

As regards Gertrude’s personality, Erin Elizabeth Lehmann argues that there are very few instances in which she asserts her power by giving some orders (2013, p. 7). Upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s arrival in Elsinore, Claudius, and Gertrude both extend their greetings. While Claudius is in charge in issuing most of the orders, Gertrude politely requests Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “show us so much gentry and good will/ As to expend your time with us awhile/ for the supply and profit of our hope” (Shakespeare, 1992, 2.2. 22-24). This may appear to be a minute request, but it will allow Gertrude to become an equal participant in conversations when interacting with guests. As a result, Gertrude will be responsible for providing final instructions by expressing “I beseech you instantly to visit/my too much changed son” (Shakespeare, 1992, 2.2. 37-38). Then she commands “go some of you/and bring these gentlemen where Hamlet is” (Shakespeare, 1992, 2.2.38-39). In such cases, she issues commands, albeit in a subtle and gentle manner, possibly to assert her own voice. However, it is important to note that she restricts this behaviour to these particular instances and is otherwise a compliant and taciturn individual.

Indeed, it can be argued that she lacks significant agency and voice. The character of Gertrude is mainly portrayed through the perspective and perception of the male characters in the play, such as her son and old Hamlet. Her first husband contributes to the audience’s knowledge of Gertrude’s character. He says, “But, howsomever thou pursues this act, / Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.5.91-95), hence, he is judging and criticizing her. Hamlet believes that his mother is involved in Denmark’s general corruption as a result of her failure to regulate her sexuality, and he despises the fact that she has remarried: “Let me not think on’t--Frailty, thy name is woman!/ A little month, or ere those shoes were old/ With which she follow’d my poor father’s body, / Like Niobe, all tears: –why she, even she / O, God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.2. 150- 154). Hence, as Mah E-Nur Qudsi Islam notes, “[f]emale sexuality was also not for the women to decide in early modern England” (2011, p. 154). It is apparent that Hamlet was deeply disturbed by his mother’s decision to remarry. Then Islam expresses the swiftness of Gertrude’s remarriage offends Hamlet’s sensibilities due to the implications it carries.

This suggests that Gertrude possesses a strong sexual desire, one that supersedes societal norms. Hamlet is appalled and taken aback by the revelation that Gertrude is capable of such intense desire (2011, p. 155).

It is worth noting that Gertrude lacks the opportunity and freedom to take action, as is evidenced in the final scene of the play. This occurs in Act 5, scene 2, commonly known as the fencing match scene. During this duel, if she were to show support and raise a glass to her son, she would be defying her husband's command to refrain from drinking the wine. It can be seen in the following passage:

**Claudius:** Gertrude, do not drink.

**Gertrude:** I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me.

*[She drinks, then offers the cup to Hamlet.]*

**Claudius:** *[Aside]* It is the poisoned cup. It is too late. (Shakespeare, 1992, 5. 2. 317- 319)

Consequently, Gertrude defies Claudius for the first and final time when she drinks the glass of wine, and as retribution for her disobedience, she is condemned to death, since the cup is poisoned. This exemplifies that women were not truly permitted to disregard any directive issued by a man in their life, especially those given by their spouses. Gertrude takes a modern action, that is, to do as she pleases, either to drink or not to drink the glass of wine and not obey her husband's command. Notwithstanding, the issue is that she is ensnared in the homosocial network of male authority that prevails within the court. Therefore, even if she possesses some level of authority in the matter of remarriage, it becomes evident later on that she is merely a pawn in the power struggles and competitions of these men. This indicates that women from all strata of society were trapped in a complex situation from which they could not extricate themselves. Moreover, if they attempted to assert their authority, they were further punished.

If one solely concentrates on Gertrude's dialogue and actions, it can be inferred that Shakespeare does not intend to depict her in a positive or negative manner. Instead, she is portrayed as a woman who, if given more authority, would have utilized it to assist both her son and Ophelia. Even if Gertrude privileged her independence and did not fulfil the role of the 'caring mother' when choosing to remarry, Shakespeare appears to depict

her as a caring mother in other instances. This renders her character ambiguous and truer to life, as individuals are not one-dimensional, but possess multifaceted complexities, which Shakespeare reflects in his portrayal of Gertrude. There are numerous instances in the play where Gertrude displays her maternal and regal qualities. One such instance occurs in Act 1, scene 2, where Gertrude provides Hamlet with guidance and motivation to overcome his excessive mourning for his deceased father. She says, “Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. / Do not forever with thy veiled lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust. / Thou know’st ’tis common; all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity” (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.2. 70-751). This demonstrates that she, as a maternal figure, is endeavouring to assist her son in overcoming his grief. Additionally, in Act 1, scene 2, she inquires of Hamlet, “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. / I pray thee, stay with us. Go not to Wittenberg” (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.2. 22-23). This reflects her dual role as a loving mother and a regal queen. She implores Hamlet to remain at court with her and King Claudius instead of returning to Wittenberg, where he had been studying. Furthermore, in Act 4, scene 5, upon Laertes’s arrival at court to demand justice for his father’s demise, Gertrude initially attempts to placate him and comprehend the circumstances. She articulates, “Alack, what noise is this?” (Shakespeare, 1992, 4.5. 104), displaying her apprehension towards the disruption and her eagerness to rectify the situation as the sovereign. Then, she says, “How cheerfully on the false trail they cry. / O, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!” (Shakespeare, 1992, 4.5. 119-20). In this moment, the response of Gertrude can be construed as a manifestation of her apprehension regarding the stability of the court and her exasperation with the intensifying conflict. This highlights that despite prioritizing her independence and not fulfilling the traditional role of a nurturing mother when deciding to remarry, Shakespeare portrays Gertrude as a caring mother in various other instances. This ambiguity adds a layer of realism to her character, as individuals are multifaceted and complex. Shakespeare aptly captures this complexity through Gertrude’s portrayal.

Having said that, it can be said that Gertrude herself is not given much opportunity to speak in the play, appearing in only ten out of twenty scenes, despite occupying the pivotal role of queen in the Danish court. Furthermore, Gertrude is often utilized as a prop in many scenes, standing idly by and merely reacting to the comments made about her by other male characters, as seen in the marriage scene. This textual evidence shows how

limited her social role was, hence, this illustrates that she does not have much power and voice.

To conclude, following the demise of Gertrude's first husband, she promptly seized the chance or loophole (Novy, 2017, p. 17) to break free by marrying Claudius, thus enabling her to retain her position as queen and maintain her status. Shakespeare's portrayal of Gertrude in *Hamlet* exhibits a multifaceted and ambiguous character, imbuing her with a level of complexity akin to that of a human being, rather than relying on stereotypical representations.<sup>3</sup> During that period, the established norms and conventions of the time created a distinct dichotomy between women, classifying them as either virtuous or immoral. In this regard, Gertrude could only be classified as either virtuous or immoral, with no room for ambiguity. In essence, a woman who fulfilled all the roles assigned to her was deemed virtuous, while a woman who failed to do so was considered immoral. This division was instituted with the primary aim of controlling women and enforcing conformity in their behaviour to restrict their agency. However, according to Bertrandias the female identity is complex and multifaceted, and a woman cannot be classified as either a good or bad woman. In this manner, Shakespeare makes her ambiguous and gives her many dimensions, like a human being, as opposed to making her stereotypically one way or another (either faithful wife and mother) or 'femme fatale'.

In essence, it can be observed that the plot in tragedies is tightly structured and centred around themes such as fate, destiny, and the downfall of the protagonist, who is typically a male character. The progression of the tragedy is linear and inevitable, culminating in a tragic conclusion. The female characters, on the other hand, are often assigned predefined roles, either as supporting figures or victims. This constraint serves

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that there exist a multitude of male critics who have portrayed Gertrude in a negative manner by unjustly casting her as a dubious character. As an instance, A.C. Bradley asserts that "It was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was aching with love, and his body doubtless was weakened by sorrow" (1905, p. 118). Furthermore, numerous male directors have depicted Gertrude and oversimplified her complexities, portraying her as a neglectful mother who betrays her own son and as a seductive and dangerous woman. These directors include Laurence Olivier in his 1948 film adaptation of *Hamlet*, Franco Zeffirelli in his 1990 version of *Hamlet*, and Michael Almereyda in his 2000 film adaptation of *Hamlet*. However, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film adaptation of *Hamlet* departs from the previous sexist portrayals of Gertrude and presents her in a neutral light, accurately reflecting her character as written in the play without imposing the director's personal biases.



to diminish their agency, restricting their ability to make impactful decisions or drive the narrative forward.

#### **4.2.3. The Situation of Young Girls**

This subsection aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the circumstances and challenges faced by Ophelia, who is the daughter of Polonius, the chief counsellor to King Claudius. The focus is on the plight of women in tragedies who are often subjected to control, with the violence inflicted upon them being more explicit and pervasive. Additionally, this section seeks to evaluate the duality of the character of Ophelia. Indeed, she can be viewed as a compliant young woman who is subjugated by the male figures in her life, namely her father, brother, and Hamlet himself, leading to the negation of her personality, lack of agency, and ultimate self-destruction, and, conversely, she can also be seen as a woman who possesses power, freedom, and a voice, as evidenced by her expression of madness and her deliberate decision to end her life through suicide.

The character of Ophelia has been a topic of interest for many scholars due to her complex and intriguing persona. There are two distinct interpretations of her character, the first being that she is unequivocally restricted and manipulated by the male figures in her life as well as by the societal norms of her era. In this manner, as Jacob K. Nielsen states, “Ophelia is characterized as an innocent victim of the cruelties of those that used her dependent and submissive nature for personal gain” (2026, p. 38). The second interpretation posits that she is a resilient, intelligent, and strong woman who utilizes moments of madness and symbolic actions to express her own will and insights, thereby challenging the limitations imposed upon her.

The character of Ophelia is scarcely present in the play, and when she does appear, she lacks agency and has very few lines of dialogue. According to Safaei and Hashim, “[Ophelia] is marginalized, victimized, and even brutally mocked in Hamlet” (2014, 310). Laertes, Ophelia’s brother, clearly articulates the societal expectation that a woman’s primary duty should be the preservation of her chastity. He emphasizes that young women must demonstrate their virtue by zealously guarding their virginity. In the very beginning of the play, he says: “If [a woman] unmask her beauty to the moon. / Virtue itself ’scapes not calumnious strokes. / The canker galls the infants of the spring / Too oft before their

buttons be disclosed, / And, in the morn and liquid dew of youth, / Contagious blastments are most imminent” (Shakespeare, 1992, 1. 3. 41-46). He indicates that it would be prudent for Ophelia, a female, to exercise restraint in her manner of expression and conceal her sexuality. Moreover, this interaction exemplifies that Laertes warns Ophelia that even individuals of virtuous character can be the victims of defamation. He employs metaphors to exemplify that the youth are particularly susceptible to the influences of vice and malice, and counsels her to exercise caution in safeguarding her reputation. Surprisingly, Ophelia replies: “I shall the effect of this good lesson keep / As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother, / Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, / Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads / And recks not his own rede” (Shakespeare, 1992, 1. 3.49-55). This illustrates the assertiveness and intelligence of Ophelia. She acknowledges the advice of her brother to maintain her virtuousness, while also cautioning him against being hypocritical. In doing so, Ophelia displays her capacity for independent thought, clear expression of ideas, and accountability of her brother’s actions. This interaction underscores her moral integrity and her own agency within their relationship. In relation to a woman’s chastity/virginity, Xinyi Chen claims that “Ophelia’s duality of femininity illustrates the contradictories of chastity and eroticism yet both of which are contained in Elizabethan gender ideology about woman. The society expected woman to be chaste, but they take cautions against woman’s sexual attraction” (2020, p. 255).

In the play, Ophelia’s father, Polonius, consistently employs an overly aggressive and isolating language towards his daughter. He regards her relationship with Hamlet solely in mercantile terms, believing it to be unsuitable. Polonius advises Ophelia to separate herself from Hamlet, asserting that she lacks the capacity to manage her own reputation appropriately. He warns Ophelia about her association with Hamlet, exercising control over her conduct and questioning her honour. This scenario reflects the patriarchal structure of the society, wherein women’s behaviour and choices were stringently regulated by male figures of authority. For instance, Polonius states:

Marry, well bethought.

’Tis told me he hath very oft of late

Given private time to you, and you yourself

Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.

If it be so (as so 'tis put on me,

And that in way of caution), I must tell you

You do not understand yourself so clearly

As it behoves my daughter and your honour.

What is between you? Give me up the truth (Shakespeare, 1992, 1. 3. 98-107)

This excerpt depicts how normal it is for a father to interrogate her daughter about her romantic life. He insinuates that Ophelia has been excessively magnanimous with her time and attention towards Hamlet, which could potentially damage her reputation and integrity. Polonius orders Ophelia to elaborate on their relationship, demonstrating his apprehension for her conduct and his aspiration to supervise. Also, Polonius attempts to persuade her that Hamlet is only interested in exploiting her. Nevertheless, Ophelia harbours profound sentiments for Hamlet, but her father dismisses her emotions, indicating her lack of autonomy and liberty. In the same scene, Polonius admonishes Ophelia not to:

Believe his vows, for they are brokers,

Not of that dye which their investments show,

But mere implorators of unholy suits,

Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds

The better to beguile. This is for all:

I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth

Have you so slander any moment leisure

As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.

Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.4.135-144)

In this passage, it is evident that Ophelia's conduct is restrained, and she is explicitly directed to refrain from conversing with Hamlet. Then, Ophelia answers him "I shall obey, my lord" (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.4. 145). In this statement, Ophelia pledges to comply with her father's directive. This demonstrates her acquiescence and deference to her father's power, underscoring her limited autonomy.

Additionally, Ophelia is romantically involved with Hamlet, but their relationship is complex and Hamlet's behaviour towards her becomes increasingly unpredictable as the play unfolds. Hamlet insults, disrespects and mocks Ophelia which shows that she is not even valued by the man she loves. According to Harold Bloom, "What emerges clearly is that Hamlet is playacting, and that Ophelia already is the prime victim of his dissembling" (2004, p. 38). At the beginning of the play, it appears that both Hamlet and Ophelia hold reciprocal feelings for each other. However, Hamlet's behaviour becomes harsh and cruel towards Ophelia as he acts mad and concentrates on seeking vengeance for his father's murder. For instance, in the nunnery scene Hamlet orders her to go to a nunnery in highly disrespectful terms, since 'nunnery' was a slang term for brothel in Early Modern English:

Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be  
a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest,  
but yet I could accuse me of such things that it  
were better my mother had not borne me: I am  
very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses  
at my beck than I have thoughts to put them  
in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act  
them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling  
between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves

all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. /Where's your father? (Shakespeare, 1992, 3. 1. 131-141)

Hamlet accuses Ophelia of dishonesty against him and questions women's virtue. However, this harsh treatment leaves Ophelia feeling confused and hurt. Additionally, such behaviour of Hamlet towards her adds to Ophelia's emotional turmoil, which ultimately leads to her mental breakdown. Later, in the play-within-a-play scene Hamlet publicly mocks Ophelia:

**Queen:** Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me.

**Hamlet:** No, good mother. Here's metal more attractive.

*Hamlet takes a place near Ophelia.*

...

**Hamlet:** Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

**Ophelia:** No, my lord.

**Hamlet:** I mean, my head upon your lap?

**Ophelia:** Ay, my lord.

**Hamlet:** Do you think I meant country matters?

**Ophelia:** I think nothing, my lord.

**Hamlet:** That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs  
(Shakespeare, 1992, 3.2. 115- 125)

In this scene, Hamlet's attitude towards her is proactive, disrespectful, and manipulative. In view of this, Linda Welshimer Wagner expresses that Shakespeare intentionally designed the character of Ophelia's a "convenient contrivance" or "reflection" to facilitate "Hamlet's analytical scenes", in addition to evoking a powerful emotional response from the audience by depicting her descent into madness and ultimate demise (1963, p. 94).

The alternative interpretation of Ophelia is that she demonstrates her power and voice through her madness and her manner of dying. According to Jiaming Wang:

The descent into madness becomes a poignant manifestation of Ophelia's internal struggle against the societal constraints that bind her. Her madness is not merely a consequence of personal grief but a profound commentary on the stifling pressures placed upon her. The loss of her father, the betrayal by Hamlet, and the weight of societal expectations converge to unravel Ophelia's sanity (2024, p. 82).

During Act 4, scene 5 of the play, she descends into madness due to her inability to cope with the fact that her father has passed away, as her existence revolved around him. In other words, she has spent her life undertaking actions to abide by and satisfy her father, whether it be terminating her relationship with Hamlet or maintaining her virtue. However, upon her father's death, she loses her sense of purpose in life. The scene commences:

*Enter Ophelia distracted.*

**Ophelia:** Where is the beauteous Majesty of Denmark?

**Queen:** How now, Ophelia?

**Ophelia:** *sings*

*How should I your true love know*

*From another one?*

*By his cockle hat and staff*

*And his sandal shoon.*

**Queen:** Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?

**Ophelia:** Say you? Nay, pray you, mark.

*Sings.* He is dead and gone, lady,

*He is dead and gone;*

*At his head a grass-green turf,*

*At his heels a stone.*

Oh, ho!

**Queen:** Nay, but Ophelia—

**Ophelia:** Pray you, mark. (Shakespeare, 1992, 4.5. 25-40)

This scene showcases Ophelia's descent into madness, which serves as a symbolic manifestation of her rebellion against the societal conventions and expectations that have been imposed on her as a young woman. Additionally, it also highlights her struggle to maintain her composure and sanity, as she grapples with intense internal turmoil and a sense of loss of control. Moreover, in the play, Gertrude's account of Ophelia's demise is delivered in a poetic and empathetic manner, suggesting the possibility of an accidental, rather than intentional, suicide. Her reaction is profoundly emotional, portraying Ophelia's tragic end as a sad consequence of her fragile mental state, rather than a deliberate act. The Queen informs Laertes of Ophelia's tragic death by drowning:

**Queen:** One woe doth tread upon another's heel,

So fast they follow. Your sister's drowned, Laertes.

**Laertes:** Drowned? O, where?

**Queen:** There is a willow grows askant the brook

That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make

Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,

That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,

But our cold maids do "dead men's fingers" call

Them. (Shakespeare, 1992, 4.7.187-196)

The death of Ophelia in this scene can be perceived as a manifestation of her agency since it signifies her ultimate act of self-determination. By opting to drown herself, Ophelia attempts to seize control of her actions and to liberate herself from the limitations and demands of the society she inhabits. This includes the manipulation of her father Polonius and the rejection by Hamlet. Her tragic demise can be regarded as a rebellious assertion of agency in a society that frequently disregards and silences women. Tynelle Ann Olivas argues that Ophelia's funeral should be focused on her, she is yet again deprived of a voice, reduced to an object, and excluded from the centre of attention. Despite being siblings, Laertes treats Ophelia as a surrogate daughter to exercise his patriarchal dominance (2015, p. 25-26).

As stated in the introduction, Phyllis Rackin's *Shakespeare and Women* (2005) features a chapter titled "A Usable History" in which she posits that women in Shakespeare's time were able to exercise their own choices in negotiating marriages, acting as executors of wills, and participating in pre-Reformation drama. She also argues that "aristocratic women managed great estates and wielded economic power comparable to that of the head of a large modern corporation; and women lower on the social scale were active in trades that are now regarded as 'traditionally male'" (Rackin, 2005, p. 7). Nevertheless, the pressure and silencing imposed upon young girls, which relegated them to the lowest rank in society and rendered them invisible, can be interpreted as a symptom of the markedly patriarchal nature of Shakespeare's society, despite the positive situations remarked upon by Rackin. Young girls, being the most vulnerable within this patriarchal system, bore the brunt and experienced the full contradictions of patriarchy, as it was upon them that these contradictions came to bear. It is the weight of these contradictions that ultimately crushes Ophelia and drives her into madness, leaving her with no other option but to reflect these contradictions through her songs and incoherent speech.

It is crucial to highlight the relationship between the female characters in the play. Gertrude and Ophelia demonstrate a profound sense of empathy and compassion towards one another.<sup>4</sup> The emotion of compassion between two women presents the possibility of exploiting loopholes and subversion, and their relationship also provides insight into the female identity. Gertrude displays a maternal sentiment towards Ophelia when she

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<sup>4</sup> In the movie *Ophelia* (2018), directed by Claire McCarthy, and which makes the character of Ophelia central and is told from her point of view, Ophelia and Gertrude are depicted as very close and friends, thereby showing the close bond that could have developed between both women.



expresses, “I had hoped you would become my Hamlet’s wife; I thought to decorate your bridal bed, sweet maiden, and not to scatter flowers on your grave” (Shakespeare, 1992, 5. 1. 225-227). This desire is not voiced by anyone else in the play due to it being a male-dominated world. Hamlet cannot indulge in love and marriage as he is preoccupied with seeking revenge. The play mainly revolves around the relationship between parents, children, and uncles, but Ophelia, a typical young girl, is entirely overlooked in the play. However, Gertrude had hoped for her to become Hamlet’s wife, indicating that women had a separate, albeit truncate or interrupted, storyline. Indeed, unfortunately, Claudius, Polonius, and Laertes put an end to this romantic relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet because they were part of the homosocial court that excluded women.

To conclude, the character development of Ophelia and Gertrude illustrates the societal pressure on women to conform to gender norms, which dictate that they should be subservient, quiet, and modest. However, it is important to note that gender is a social construct, as Simone de Beauvoir argues in her seminal work *The Second Sex* when she states that “One is not born a woman, but rather one becomes a woman” (2011, p. 14). De Beauvoir explains that biology does not determine womanhood, but rather it is shaped by cultural, societal, and linguistic constructs that create gender stereotypes. Therefore, if one can learn how to become a woman, one can also unlearn these constructs and become something else entirely. It is essential to acknowledge the process by which Shakespeare conveys this perspective on the nature of women. The text, for instance, highlights how Ophelia’s association with water in the description of her demise serves to reinforce the broader societal perception of women as being more closely tied to emotions and the natural environment, in contrast with the traditionally held notion of men as more rational and detached. The structure of Shakespeare’s tragedies tends to be centred around the actions and experiences of male protagonists, while female characters are frequently depicted in more passive roles. This structural bias serves to constrain the agency and influence of women within the tragedies, as they are more responsive to the decisions and actions of their male counterparts, rather than actively shaping the plot progression themselves. For example, the female characters in *Hamlet* and *Othello* are largely defined by the actions and decisions of the male protagonists, rather than functioning as autonomous individuals within the narrative. Conversely, the structure of Shakespeare’s comedies is flexible and dynamic, allowing female characters greater agency. In *Hamlet* the plot is controlled, offering limited avenues for the female characters to evade their

predestined fates or influence the unfolding of events. The narrative adheres to a predetermined trajectory of revenge, madness, and demise, leaving minimal room for deviation. In the comedic work like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrates a heightened degree of flexibility and resolution in its handling of conflicts. The strategic employment of magical elements, misunderstandings, and reconciliations between characters enables the playwright to manoeuvre the narrative in a more fluid and adaptable fashion, ultimately leading the protagonists to favourable endings. These two different narrative structures, allows to explore and subvert loopholes in a more sustained and unconventional manner in comedies than in tragedies.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As has been seen, female agency is a very significant theme in Shakespeare's plays. The main aim of this research has been to demonstrate how Shakespeare tends to grant more agency to female characters in his comedies than in his tragedies. This has been exemplified through a comparison between the plays *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the character of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, and a warrior, is portrayed as an empowered figure who exhibits a strong authoritative presence through her silence and gestures. Despite being captured by Theseus, she tries to maintain her dignity and authority. However, her marriage to Theseus can also be seen as a symbol of her submission, as she is conquered and integrated into Athenian society. In the case of Hermia, she demonstrates her independence by rejecting her father's wishes and choosing to elope with Lysander, rather than marrying Demetrius as her father desires. However, Hermia faces oppression through the Athenian law, which grants her father the power to decide her fate, even to the point of death or life in a nunnery. Moreover, the character of Helena illustrates her resilience and voice in pursuing her desires, as her primary objective is to marry Demetrius. Despite facing rejection and ridicule from Demetrius, she refuses to abandon her love for him in a society in which women tend to suppress their desires. Nonetheless, Helena is oppressed and disrespected by Demetrius, who rejects her love and threatens to sexually assault her. This indicates that, in Athenian society, women were perceived as vulnerable beings by the men, who believed that they could control and frighten women by attacking their sexuality and honour.

In *Hamlet*, the female characters are subjected to a greater degree of subjugation and suppression when compared to the treatment that the female characters receive in the comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For example, Gertrude, as the Queen of Denmark possesses considerable influence and agency. This is particularly evident in her ability to remarry after the death of King Hamlet, as well as her capacity to issue commands as a queen to Hamlet's friends, thereby securing her status and power. Nonetheless, Gertrude is also subject to oppression, as her decisions and actions are heavily scrutinized by the male characters, particularly Claudius and her son Hamlet, who are vehemently opposed to her remarriage. Furthermore, in the only instance where she unintentionally attempts to defy Claudius and drink the wine, she is subsequently 'punished' for her actions, since she dies from the poisoned cup. In the case of Ophelia, she is subjected to abuse and

control by her father Polonius and brother Laertes, who exert dominance over her relationship and actions with Hamlet. They counsel her to maintain her virginity and chastity. In the play, there are instances when Hamlet exhibits a disrespectful attitude towards Ophelia. For example, when he advises her to enter a convent or ‘nunnery’, such disrespectful actions stem from his belief that women are inherently dishonest and corrupt. However, when Ophelia subsequently succumbs to madness following her father’s murder and ultimately takes her own life, the tragic impact of this oppression is accentuated. Ophelia has no agency whatsoever, and she uses the little power she has to abandon the patriarchal society she inhabits. Plus, her suicide is not a sign of agency but a microcosm or symbol of the banishment of women and everything feminine from the male court.

As evidenced by the present research, despite the significant oppression experienced by women in these two plays, particularly more in tragedies than in comedies, women had limited opportunities to break free from their gender roles. However, it is also true that women find and exploit “loopholes” (Novy, 2017, p. 17) to create a sense of community and sisterhood among themselves, though this may be considered a utopian ideal. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Helena’s reference to the ‘double cherry’ demonstrates the unity among two women. Although both of them face similar challenges, their friendship serves as a clear illustration of how marriage, as asocial construct, can cause rivalry between two women. It is clear that marriage is the root cause of the rift between the two women over the men they love when they venture into the woods. In Shakespeare’s comedies, it is a well-established convention that his comedic plays tend to conclude with the institution of marriage and the restoration of patriarchal social structures. Moreover, the structure of the comedies also facilitates the exploration of female agency, since the woods themselves can be considered a strategic ‘loophole’ whereby the play explores female desire and subjectivity.

Conversely, *Hamlet* – and the tragedies in general – shows how, had women had more agency and a stronger voice in society, they would have written a different story, but the tragedy itself is unable to give them this voice. In the case of Hamlet, for instance, Gertrude expresses her desire for Ophelia to marry Hamlet, showing that, unlike Claudius and the homosocial court he rules upon, she cares for their well-being and is in touch with his son’s and Ophelia’s desires. Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius metaphorically separates her from Ophelia, as she is expected to side with her husband, even in the face of

Ophelia's tragic death. The reason why Ophelia's death is extremely sad, and disturbing is due to the fact that she lacks a female figure in her life. The underlying cause of Ophelia's emotional turmoil is the absence of a female presence in her life. Specifically, her mother is no longer present, and Gertrude's attempts to fill this role are hindered by her obligations to remain loyal and submissive to her husband, Claudius.

In a nutshell, In Shakespeare's comedies, the female characters are usually portrayed with a greater degree of autonomy and the opportunity to challenge societal conventions. Conversely, his tragedies tend to depict women in more restricted roles, reflective of their limited agency, which ultimately culminates in their tragic and terrible demise.

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