CONTENTS

THE ESSENTIAL SHAKESPEARE HEROINES

By Cassia Baldock
In collaboration with Harry Jivenmukta

INTRODUCTION 1

No matter how celebrated Shakespeare's heroines are, they still remain largely secondary to the male characters, although this is, of course, in keeping with drama of that period. In the following six portraits, a variety of female characters are investigated who are not only interesting as personalities in themselves, but indubitably provide an integral role to the main plot, if not dominating it.

To begin with, Lady Macbeth is probably the most famous example of a leading Shakespearean female character. We will consider various aspects including:

- ⌘ Her role as a wife
- ⌘ Her femininity
- ⌘ Her ruthlessness
- ⌘ Her guilt

By contrast, Desdemona is known as a most virtuous heroine, but this chapter questions to what extent she was innocent, including her role as a daughter. Similarly, King Lear's daughters are notably a mixture of good and evil. We will mostly focus on Goneril and Regan, why they are perceived as brutal yet strong characters, and the way their weaknesses are exposed when they fall in love.

The study of Ophelia shows the small but significant role she plays in Hamlet. We shall consider her as the hero's beloved, a daughter and a sister, and the way she finally finds expression as herself in madness.

Finally, the female leading roles in two comedies. In The Merchant of Venice, Portia is the most independent female character, not only controlling the action, but also her husband. The last portrait is of Viola, who takes on the part of a male servant for most of Twelfth Night. The study concludes with a chapter about the various secondary female characters, roles which range from Queen to Maid, Witch to Whore, and their contribution to the plays.

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare created some of the most memorable female roles in Drama, and to play such parts, even now, is considered the crowning achievement for any leading actress.

THE FAITHFUL WIFE

Desdemona plays the part of the doomed lover in Othello. She is discussed at length before her first appearance (Act 1 Scene 3). For example, Iago describes her as *'your white ewe'* (1.1.89), and appears to be passive, demure and naïve. On first speaking, she is eloquent and noble, as well as assertive in justifying her elopement with Othello: *'I do perceive here a divided duty'* (1.3.181). She rationalises her love for him, stating that she fell for his inner qualities, and shows her support for him. Although she was rebellious in her actions, this proves that she does know what she wants.

Desdemona does reveal a degree of naivety in asking Iago to praise her, but is witty when making her defence. She doesn't want to listen to Iago's words, being adamant that she is a devoted wife to Othello. They appear to be devoted to one another, and he describes her as *'my soul's joy'* (2.1.184). Even after Iago begins to put doubts in Othello's mind, Desdemona is always innocent whenever she is questioned. The audience knows that she is faithful, but by demonstrating friendly feelings towards Cassio, by asking Othello to talk to him, she only augments his suspicion. She is a little careless with the handkerchief, which was a present from Othello, and although not superstitious, it is at this point that she appears incredibly naïve. The idea that Othello may be accusing her of being unfaithful is so disturbing to her that she continues to stress her disbelief. Throughout the play, she claims to be *'Your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife'* (4.2.35).

Desdemona appears to be resigned to her fate, when she makes a premonition of her death (their deaths?): *'If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me/In one of those same sheets'*. Talking about her wedding sheets juxtaposes death and marriage, and the intensity of such a comparison is a striking metaphor, showing her fidelity and devotion to Othello. Following this, we get an insight into the differing views which she and her maid, Emilia, have about fidelity, and this highlights Desdemona's innocence.

To the end, Othello's love is indisputable. He says he is *'one that lov'd not wisely, but too well:/Of one not easily jealous'* (5.2.345-6). As Desdemona dies, she still pleads her innocence: *'A guiltless death I die'* (5.2.123), but by blaming herself when Emilia asks who killed her, forgives Othello.

Thus, despite being hailed at the beginning as a noble, eloquent woman who knows what she wants, Desdemona appears to become weaker and weaker, until by the end, she destroys herself through her love for Othello.

THE UNDUTIFUL DAUGHTER

The character of Desdemona is predominantly described in her father's words. Again, Brabantio has great love for her, but since the news about Othello is very shocking to him, he creates an image of his daughter as a weak character who has been enchanted. The situation makes no sense to him, as he thought he knew her so well, but everything he believed has been turned upside down. He is incredibly emotional: *'She is abus'd, stol'n from me and corrupted'*, and laments the news as much as if she was dead, a sinister fore-shadow of the outcome.

Despite this representation as a passive daughter, led astray by Othello, Desdemona does not appear deceitful towards her father, because she is honest and respectful in her language when addressing him. But Brabantio's advice to Othello is most pertinent: *'Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see:/She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee'*. A spiteful remark, which shows how his feelings for his daughter have totally turned around. Admittedly, Desdemona's actions are ambiguous: she is disrespectful in going against her father's wishes, yet makes the valid point that her mother went against her own father in choosing Brabantio. Later on, it is revealed that Brabantio dies from shock. However, as his daughter's reaction to this is unknown, the audience does not get any further insight into Desdemona's feelings.

THE WOMAN OVER-POWERED

Like many female Shakespearean characters, Desdemona is described as property, a prize belonging to either her father or her husband:

- Brabantio accuses Othello of stealing her from him: *'O foul thief, where has thou stow'd my daughter?'* (1.2.62-3),
- Then Othello states: *'I won his daughter'* (1.3.94).

Even Iago, when alerting Brabantio about news of the elopment, starts off by shouting out about thieves. It's as if Desdemona's father does not think she is capable of looking after herself, or making her own decisions.

Most characters in the play are affected, and overpowered by Iago's scheming, Desdemona in particular. He is so desperate to take revenge on Othello, so taken up with the desire for power, that he truly believes the ends justifies the means and doesn't care who he hurts. Desdemona's plight, her helplessness, engages the audience's sympathy because there is actually very little that she can do to escape Iago's plotting, because she unwittingly gives him ideas and ammunition, which he twists to suit his own purposes. When she is distressed about Othello being at sea at the beginning of Act Two and says *'I am not merry but I do beguile/The thing I am, by seeming otherwise'*, Iago uses this innocuous remark to suggest that she is deceitful.

Generally, Desdemona is overpowered by her innocence in her love for Othello. The couple felt they were unassailable, because they had been through such adversity and their relationship had survived it. They are thus brought down by their idealism and the immense passion they feel for each other. Their lack of knowledge of one another leads to distrust, a weakness which Iago has recognised and works on to ensure the success of his plotting.

[See also Whore, Page17]

EXERCISE

1. Is Desdemona truly innocent? Look at her relationship with Iago/Othello.

LADY MACBETH

THE WICKED WIFE

Lady Macbeth may not be everyone's idea of a heroine - more accurately, the main female protagonist, but she is possibly the most famous female character Shakespeare created, probably seen as the most evil. A powerful character, as a result of her great desire for success and the lengths to which she is prepared to go, all her ambitions appear to be for her husband. As soon as she receives the letter form Macbeth, including the prophecies, she begins to plot. However, she does not appear to trust her husband fully: *'Yet I do fear thy nature'* (1.5.16). Paradoxically, she is totally dedicated to him. However, she is initially so devoted, she cannot foresee what they will have to go through in order to make Macbeth king: she truly believes that the end justifies the means.

THE PASSIONATE WOMAN

As soon as we are introduced to this character, Shakespeare reveals how passionate she is, and how merciless. The speech beginning *'Come, you spirits…'* (1.5.40 onwards) gives an important insight into her character. She even wants to be stripped of her femininity in order to be ruthless, for her husband's sake. Her words are ugly, as she calls on the supernatural to prevent her heart from ruling her body. Shakespeare makes weakness and cowardice feminine attributes, and this concept is most significantly conveyed when she begs for her milk to be exchanged for poison, the former being associated with motherhood and all the gentler qualities in a woman.

THE UNSCRUPULOUS SCHEMER

When we witness Macbeth and Lady Macbeth together, it is evident that she is dominant, since she is the one urging action in the relationship and the plot. Her imagery is violent and her method manipulative, and she rarely allows him to express his uncertainty. However, she herself begins to express weakness about the murder of Duncan, when she says: *'Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't'* (2.2.12-3). Nonetheless, she is still coldly efficient when completing this part of the plot, and in deceiving everyone else, by the horror she expresses at the murder. She retains this control when Macbeth starts to suffers from hallucinations, and is quick-witted in excusing him. However, in so doing, she accuses Macbeth of being weak, less than a man.

THE GUILTY CREATURE

The last scene where Lady Macbeth appears shows her engulfed in guilt, which manifests itself when she sleeps, and her anxiety and paranoia reveal everything. She warns herself and Macbeth: *'What's done cannot be undone'* (5.1.63-4), showing that deep down, she does feel remorse. She becomes obsessive about cleaning her hands, and the blood on her skin is a sign of her guilt. She cannot wash it off and knows it will never go away. After this scene, Lady Macbeth does not appear again. The audience is only informed about her death, driven to suicide. Macbeth dismisses it as a nuisance.

THE IMPOTENT FEMALE

Although Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most powerful women, conversely, in one scene, she becomes the most powerless, totally helpless, revealing the depth of her ultimate weakness. In a play with such an overwhelming female influence, it seems implausible that one woman could be depicted as so ruthless at a period with such fixed feminine values. Her guilt is manifest in a climatic scene, in which a doctor and gentlewoman witness her most dramatic activities. She takes on guilt for everything, even those things for which she was not directly responsible, knowing that it all refers back to the death of King Duncan, for which she is guilty. The light that she demands is symbolic of her need for redemption, as if she fears her own shadow. Similarly, her obsession with cleaning herself, purging herself of her sins. Her language is intense as if, like the gentlewoman says, she has taken leave of her senses: *'Out, damned spot! Out, I say!'* (5.1.33); *'Hell is murky'* (5.1.34); *'Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?'* (5.1.37-8).

WOMEN IN POWER

The witches have a potent purpose in this play and use subtle devices to entice Macbeth. He attempts to rationalise their predictions: *'If Chance will have me king, why, Chance may crown me,/Without my stir'* (1.3.143-4). His mercurial nature indicates a need for concern about the future of the kingdom, and shows that he is open to manipulation. The outcome of the play has always been debated:

- Wholly Macbeth's fault,
- Lady Macbeth's fault,
- The witches' fault.

Some may argue that if he is so brave, noble and strong as a soldier, he would not be so easily influenced by these various women. At first intrigued by the words of the witches, this leads him to write a letter to his wife about them. Her reaction to this shows the audience from the start that her character is ruthless and incredibly ambitious, if mostly for her husband. By contrast, Macbeth appears even weaker, because these traits in his wife must have been obvious to him previously. However, the knowledge she gains from the letter gives her the incentive to conceive the plot, and the ideas which she is cold-hearted enough to voice must also have been present in Macbeth's mind.

Not only is Lady Macbeth seen as 'active', usually a masculine trait, by comparison, Macbeth appears totally passive, which is a feminine quality. This is most evident when she instructs him to *'look like the innocent flower'* (1.5.65), and employs phallic imagery when discussing power: *'But be the serpent under't'* (1.5.66). As the play continues, Lady Macbeth is organised and prepared to take action, while Macbeth, suffering from guilt, which is manifested in hallucinations, is emotional and unsure. When his behaviour reaches a climax during the banquet, Lady Macbeth shows she has all the qualities to assert power, retaining control of the situation by being quick-witted. However, in his weakness, she demands: *'Are you a man?'* (3.4.58), a blatant association between gender and power.

EXERCISE

How evil is Lady Macbeth, and to what extent do you think she influences Macbeth? What is the significance of her sleepwalking scene?

LEAR'S DAUGHTERS

THE THREE SISTERS

Cordelia, Goneril and Regan are the most famous set of daughters from any Shakespearean play. Essentially, Cordelia is recognised as the devoted daughter, while Goneril and Regan as deceitful and power-hungry, but their characters are more complex than this. Goneril and Regan have, in fact, been described as two of the strongest female characters Shakespeare created.

LEAR AND CORDELIA

The youngest daughter, she reveals a degree of rebelliousness in the beginning when Lear asks his daughters to tell him how much they love him. Being honest, she says *'I cannot heave/My heart into my mouth'* (1.1.91-2). She obviously isn't after his money, but this remark hurts him a lot. Lear seems to have a childish need to feel loved, as if he has to make promises of power to elicit expressions of love. Because Cordelia does not succumb, Lear becomes angry and banishes her, but his love for her is evident, since he wanted her to marry and be secure. While he is preoccupied with Cordelia, his other daughters are busy scheming against him, despite having made overwhelming protestations of love.

Although Cordelia is not a central character in the play, her death is one of the main elements in this bleak tragedy. She returns near the end, providing a device for one corrupted relationship to be restored, still showing respect for her father and for patriarchy, which is made clear in her speech about her sisters: *'and let this kiss/Repair those violent harms that my two sisters/Have in thy reverence made'* (4.7.27). Lear, in his madness and misery, just wants peace, and is so full of love and fear for Cordelia that he claims: *'If you have poison for me, I will drink it/I know you do not love me'* (4.7.72).

LEAR AND GONERIL

When approaching Lear to discuss the corrupt behaviour of his men, Goneril is assumed to be acting from spite, and her father will not take responsibility. At this point, her character is ambiguous, although it seems her calculating nature is surpassed by her concern for law and order. Above all, this appears to be more important to her than the relationship with her father. He sees that she wants to take control, but rather than regarding this as a virtue, he is threatened by it: *'I am ashamed/That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus'* (1.4.288).

LEAR AND GLOUCESTER

Shakespeare provides a parallel to Lear and his daughters with this family. Yet it seems that Edgar's love for his father is unsurpassable, since he was prepared to adopt the guise of a madman for his father's sake. By contrast, when Lear finally dies, he knows that all his daughters are dead. He cannot feel satisfied that justice has been done with the punishment of the two wicked daughters, but does gain one last glimpse of hope that Cordelia may live.

THE SISTERS AS CONSPIRATORS

Goneril and Regan are up against greater forces in King Lear, when their immense ambition attempts to challenge patriarchy, as well as their father's misogyny. Their power-hungry natures are made blatantly and horrifically obvious when they torture Gloucester, which Goneril's husband, Albany, describes: *'Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?/A father, and a gracious aged man/Whose reverence even the head-lugged bear would lick,/Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you madded'* (4.2.41-4).

This is the point when Goneril and Regan assert their power in the most wicked way, but it is also the point at which Albany connects power and femininity: *'See thyself, devil:/Proper deformity shows not in the fiend/So horrid as in woman'* (4.2.60-2). Like most of the characters in Shakespeare's play, he believes the worst evil comes from a woman, although Goneril retorts that he can't be a proper man if he thinks like that. His attack seems to have no effect on them, but his disgust leads to others becoming aware of what the two sisters are capable of. What makes the attack even more evil is that it was provoked by the fact that Gloucester was trying to protect their own father from them. In craving power, they help bring about their own downfall.

THE SISTERS AS RIVALS

What mainly overpowers the two women is their love for Edmund. They are both distracted in their individual pursuits by their attempts to gain his attention, and focus on their jealousy of each other. Edmund encourages this behaviour by teasing Regan when she questions him about Goneril. Regan says: *'I shall never endure her, Dear my lord,/Be not familiar with her'* (5.1.15-6), but Goneril shows the extent of her passion when she states: *'I had rather lose the battle than that sister/Should loosen him and me'* (5.1.18-9). Edmund admits to Albany *'To both these sisters have I sworn my love,/Each jealous of the other as the stung/Are of the adder'* (5.1.56-8), which suggests that he doesn't have particular affection for either. It also alludes to the power struggles between the sisters and they spend the remainder of the play arguing over Edmund. Goneril succumbs to her innate brutality and ends up killing her sister and herself. They both become victims of their desire for power.

WOMEN IN POWER

King Lear is a play about power, and it is climactic in the way in which we witness the female forces upon which Lear depends asserting control. The move from an old order to a new one began when the King splits the leadership between Goneril and Regan. They proceed to take on a threefold battle:

- ⌘ Gender issues
- ⌘ The family
- ⌘ The traditional values of patriarchy.

IMPOTENCE

Deception has links with impotence, i.e., women asserting power over Lear. The Fool sees this as rendering him impotent, politically, as well as sexually: *'That's a shelled peascod'* (1.4.190). He incorporates horrific imagery in his language, for example, the bird looking after its young, and then getting its head bitten off. However, when Goneril shows she is in control by discussing matters with her father which give her cause for concern, Lear's madness becomes manifest in irrational anger, showing that he has more faith in his degenerate knights than in his daughter.

LEAR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS DAUGHTERS

Lear expresses his contempt for them, first, by wishing that his daughters lose the power to procreate, which would mean the end of his line, and then hopes Goneril will have children like herself, so she'll understand what he's been through. He calls for a higher power: *'Dry up in her the organs of increase,/And from her derogate body never spring/A babe to honour her'* (1.4.271-3), thus wanting to deny her the powers of a woman, if she takes on the powers of a man. He continues by saying: *'I am ashamed/That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus'* (1.4.288).

Later on, he asks: *'I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad'* (2.2.407), which seems to be more of an appeal than a threat, in recognition of the power the two daughters have over him. Lear calls them *'unnatural hags'* (2.2.467), reminiscent of the language Macbeth and Banquo use about the witches, and alludes to the idea that power is ugly in a woman. When in tears, Lear rejects them as feminine, as a part of the idea that being womanly will make him less of a man.

By the end, Lear believes that he may have given away his kingdom, but he still asserts his title and power: *'I am a king, my masters, know you that?'* (4.6.196). As he dies in misery, knowing what he has done, it is nonetheless indisputable that his daughters destroyed him by ruthlessly asserting power.

EXERCISE

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the three sisters?

THE PASSIVE VICTIM

Ophelia's destiny as a woman appears to be as certain as that of Desdemona. She is recognised purely as the daughter of Polonius and the beloved of Hamlet throughout the play, until the end when, rejected by Hamlet, in her madness, she actually finds her own voice. Initially, she is introduced as being beautiful and chaste, which is evident from her shock when she talks about Hamlet: *'As if he had been leased out of hell/To speak of horrors'* (2.1.83-4). As a result of this comment, ironically, Polonius comes to believe that it is Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet which has sent the Prince mad.

OPHELIA AND HAMLET

Ophelia retains her dignity when Hamlet teases her, and responds with wit and elegance. However, as his anger towards his mother grows, he takes this out on Ophelia: *'Get thee to a nunnery'* (3.1.121). As he rants, Ophelia remains laconic, and the few words she does say are a plea for his sanity: *'Heavenly powers, restore him'*(3.1.143). Hamlet believes he has been seduced by her womanly powers, as he has been deceived by his mother: *'Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad'* (3.1.148-9). Subjected to Hamlet's immense change of moods, she is miserable, but still says little, this time because she is weary of him. He persists in turning anything she says against her, for example, when she informs Hamlet that the prologue to the play is brief, he retorts: *'As woman's love'* (3.2.149), alluding to his mother, but transferring his resentment to Ophelia, although she is guiltless. Her relationship with Hamlet is perpetually in turmoil, as each in turn seems to repel the other.

THE DAUGHTER

Typically, like all Shakespearean heroines with a living father, Ophelia is expected to be a dutiful daughter, and seems to do her utmost to fulfil this role. They do have a close relationship, in that he looks after her, and she is very obedient. At the beginning we see Polonius encouraging Ophelia to spurn Hamlet's advances, and there is no dispute: she must do as she is told. She informs her father when Hamlet visits her, and as he is protective of his daughter, he then tells Queen Gertrude.

THE SISTER

Laertes, as her brother, is equally as caring towards her as their father. At the end, he actually has an argument with Hamlet about who loved her the most. Prior to this, he describes her madness as an extension of femininity, repressing her new found means of expressing herself: *'Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself/She turns to favour and to prettiness'* (4.5.185).

OPHELIA: POWERLESS

The common denominator in every play where women are doomed victims, is their love for a man, usually the hero. This seems to represent their weakness.

Ophelia plays a relatively minor role and although essentially good, gradually suffers more and more throughout the play which leads to her death, as a result of the oppressiveness of male characters: Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes. When she first appears in Act One, Scene Three her brother is advising her, and initially, she seems to abide by his every word. However, her responses show a degree of wit, and she warns him not to teach her one way, then do the opposite himself. This insight suggests that there is more to her than at first appears, and she is not such a weak character.

When discussing an encounter with Hamlet with her father, she not only reveals how Hamlet over-powered her by frightening her, but also the power her father has over her, because she obeyed his wishes by spurning Hamlet. It was taken for granted in Shakespeare's day that a girl should respect her father's orders, but she is evidently going against her own desires.

OPHELIA OVERCOME BY MADNESS

Many critics have suggested that she actually becomes free once in this state. When the other characters witness her behaviour, she is called *'pretty lady'* (4.5.41) and *'Pretty Ophelia*' (4.5.56) by the King. It suggests that they are patronising her, perhaps not taking her madness seriously. This idea is augmented by a generic gentleman who says: *'She is importunate,/Indeed distract. Her moods will needs be pitied'* (4.5.1-2). Such attitudes reflect the oppressive forces of men. Her descent into madness results in her death, and her melancholic condition seems to be caused by her father's death and Hamlet's madness, whether feigned or real. Sorrow at the tragedy of her death is the one thing which all the other characters momentarily have in common; the male characters believe she should have been protected from such horrors, as the King says: *'Poor Ophelia/Divided from herself.'*

Ophelia suffers from immense disappointment in the way her hopes for Hamlet are suddenly dashed, but also from sexual denial. However, madness makes her an assertive, dangerous, confusing and mysterious character who is suddenly brought to life; even her language is livelier, indeed, lewder. She is no longer obedient as she doesn't have her father or her beloved to answer to. In being overpowered by madness, paradoxically, she appears to be set free.

EXERCISE

Ophelia is a minor character; what is her importance to the plot?

THE SEARCH FOR A SUITABLE HUSBAND

Portia is a radically different type of lover in The Merchant of Venice. Largely independent, the predicament she faces concerns finding a future husband, rather than anything to do with ambition and love. Rather than being honoured by the attentions paid her by suitors, she expresses repugnance at the thought of them, showing her unhappiness and frustration, and wittily caricatures them: *'Ay that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse'* (1.2.39-40). However, she is half coy, half passionate when she talks of Bassanio, as if trying to conceal her true feelings: *'Yes, yes, it was Bassanio, as I think so was he call'd.'* (1.2.111).

PORTIA AND BASSANIO

Although she appears to be courteous, she is also somewhat prejudiced when having to deal with her other suitors, quickly dismissing them all. The only one she cares about is Bassanio, and with her lengthy speeches, attempts to prolong his visit, fearing he will choose the wrong casket. Nonetheless, she is honourable, doing her duty as a daughter, and does not give him a clue. Her language is poetic as she expresses her love, but as she reveals her concern, it augments the tension. This relationship adds to the theme of appearance and reality, since Bassanio should choose the lead casket, as an indication that he doesn't judge by outward show. One of the strongest of Shakespeare's heroines, Portia is quite dominant in her relationship with Bassanio, whilst going to extreme lengths to make him happy.

PORTIA AND HER FATHER

From the first, Portia is shown to be a dutiful daughter, but this is a major part of her predicament. The sub-plot revolves around the fact that her father was protective of her and concerned for her future. If he wasn't going to be there to make sure she picked a suitable husband, he wanted to devise a way of deciding for her. Portia finds it unsatisfactory to have to follow her father's wishes, but is resigned to the fact that she must. Nonetheless, unlike him, who has devised a test giving everyone an opportunity, without discriminating, she doesn't give all her suitors an equal chance.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The device of confusing other characters by disguise is a frequent motif in Shakespearean plays, although used for a variety of purposes. One particularly interesting device is the change of gender, generally a woman disguised as a man. Confusion would have been heightened by the fact that female characters were usually played by young men or boys during that period.

In The Merchant Of Venice, Portia transforms herself into a doctor, which is necessary to help out Bassanio's best friend Antonio. She knows she can rescue him from his deal with Shylock, but would not be taken seriously as a woman in a court of law. She surprises her maid, Nerissa, with her plans, but manages to overcome any worries about the idea of deceit by turning the whole idea into a joke. After all, she must also convince her husband that she is a man, for the plan to be successful.

PORTIA AS THE HERO

It is worth noting how the audience was introduced originally to a jaded character, but now she has the man she loves, she treats everything light heartedly. For example, she alludes to the deceit with a sly joke: *'but in such a habit,/That they shall think we are accomplished/With that we lack'* (3.4.60-2). The juxtaposition of power and gender is evident here, and takes on a more serious edge when it is obvious she must become a 'man' if she is to overpower other men. Nonetheless, she is quite sure she will accomplish this. Discussing her plan, she caricatures the difference between the two sexes: *'I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,/And wear my dagger with the braver grace'* (3.4.64-5); *'and turn two mincing steps into a manly stride'* (3.4.67-8); *'and tell quaint lies/How honourable ladies sought my love,/Which I denying, they fell sick and died'* (93.4.69-71).

As a lawyer, she plays the part well, remaining courteous and professional. More importantly, none of the male characters doubt her gender for a minute. As a 'man', therefore, she controls the action. The question of gender and sexuality is more prominent by the end of the case, when she refuses payment but says she will accept two tokens of gratitude. She wants Bassanio's gloves, plus the ring she presented him with earlier, making him promise never to give it away. A cruel test of his fidelity and at first, he does try to resist, for all she is persistent and somewhat manipulative. He gives in only when Antonio asks him.

Once she has taken off her disguise, Portia must reveal the truth to the men. It becomes evident that the significance of the rings was to prove that Portia and Nerissa were the lawyer and the doctor, as well as a device to end the play on a light note. However, before she reveals the truth, she uses her knowledge to tease and rebuke her husband by using sexual blackmail.

PORTIA IN CONTROL

Portia's character is more rounded than that of most females we have encountered so far. She is defined as having more than simply the appeal of beauty and riches, or, conversely, lacks the weaknesses, which seems to be characteristic of most of these heroines. However, she describes herself to Bassanio as *'an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised'* (3.2.159), and this humility continues as she professes her desire and willingness to be his dutiful slave: *'Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit/Commits itself to yours and be directed,/As from her lord, her governor, her king'* (3.2.163-5).

Yet it is at point that she begins to assert control. Caring dearly for Bassanio, she naturally wants to know why he is upset, then dominates the situation, ordering him to pay Shylock off: *'Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond'* (3.2.298). She is organised, decisive and active because she is devoted to Bassanio, even foregoing the pleasures of her wedding night so that he can resolve the problem.

She shows she is ready for action by planning carefully to make sure everything runs smoothly. Despite making fun out of the situation, she takes the part seriously as soon as she appears as a lawyer in the court of law. And she dominates the most important scene of the play, although this is dubious regarding her power, because the reason she is taken seriously is because they all believe she is a man.

Her words are still extremely powerful, and she has the utmost confidence in herself, beginning with the famous appeal to Shylock, emphasising the necessity in this case of being merciful, since mercy blesses with its power and ennobles the person who bestows it. Skilfully, she uses the lawyer's power; knowing full well how she will win the case against Shylock, she still asks questions to which she knows the answers. It is part of her tactics to bring Shylock down even lower: *'Is he not able to discharge the money?'* (4.1.04). Aware that he can, by stressing it at this point, it makes Shylock feel more of a fool afterwards for not accepting.

Portia goes over every element in fine detail, reiterating extensively. Not only does this increase the tension, but more importantly, means that she employs her skill to control the action. She even manages to gain Shylock's approval: *'O wise young judge how I do honour thee!'* (4.1.220). She is cunning, in feigning naivety: *'Have by some surgeon Shylock on your charge,/To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death'* (4.1.253-4). However, this prolonging of tension is also cruel to Antonio and Bassanio, and the repetition appears hyperbolic: *'The law allows it, and the court awards it'* (4.1.299). All the same, her eloquence and shrewdness come to a climax as she calmly breaks everything down in the short speech beginning: *'Tarry a little, there is something else, -'* (4.1.301).

THE ABUSE OF POWER

Portia cannot resist exploiting her power. Not only does she manage not to reveal everything at once, nor to overreact, she allows the other characters to get excited over her discoveries. She makes a clever play on words: *'Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st'* (4.1.312), as she informs Shylock of the mistakes in his bond. And yet, in exercising her power over him, as well as all the characters present, she herself is being hypocritical, because now, she shows no mercy to Shylock, as she proceeds to attack him under another law.

The play is concluded with another assertion of her power, when she tests Bassanio's faithfulness by asking him for the ring back as a token of gratitude. Apart from having to bow to her father's wishes regarding the choice of suitor, the only time Portia fails to be in control is when asking Bassanio for the ring, which he gives her because he has been persuaded to do so by Antonio. However, she takes charge again in the last scene, because she knows things that the other characters are unaware of, and can reveal the truth whenever she wants to.

EXERCISE

To what extent does Portia control the action?

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In Twelfth Night, Viola adopts a male guise as Cesario, out of necessity, when she arrives in a strange country. She is already quite tomboyish, and extremely sharp-witted and resourceful; it is her zest for life which aids her change so successfully. Not only is she willing to become a man in order to find work, saying to the captain: *'Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him'* (1.2.57), but she is eager to be a good servant. However, the masquerade is her undoing when she finds herself in a predicament, having fallen in love with her master, Orsino. Added to this, he has given her the job of wooing Olivia on his behalf, and whilst pressing the master's suit, the servant is the one for whom Olivia falls.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Further complications arise with Viola playing the part of a man, Cesario, once her brother Sebastian turns up, and the two are mistaken for each other. Most of the humour arises from the situation, for example, when Olivia's household are describing Viola to their mistress, who asks *'What kind o' man is he?'* (1.5.145), and Malvolio answers: *'Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy; as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple'* (1.5.151-3).

As a man, Viola knows she must appear to flatter and woo Olivia, but has to rely on her wits in her attempts to keep her at a distance. At the same time, having fallen in love herself with Orsino, she has no wish to encourage his suit. Thus, when pretending to be sincere, she appears rude, and annoys Olivia by prolonging her message: *'Alas, I took great pains to study it, and 'tis poetical'* (1.5.187).

OLIVIA AND VIOLA

The confusion between Viola and Cesario is heightened because Olivia becomes intrigued with the latter and reveals her weakness when she confides that she might have loved Orsino if he hadn't misled her in the past. Thus, with Viola's next passage beginning: *'If I did love you...'* (1.5.253), it catches Olivia's attention, setting her off on the wrong track. The latter then asks Viola more personal questions about herself, and finally resorts to using cunning herself, saying: *'Let him send no more -/Unless, perchance, you come to me again/To tell me how he takes it'* (1.5.269-71). The audience knows the full extent of Olivia's true feelings when they are revealed after Viola leaves, and she rebukes herself for thinking too well of Cesario, just because of the way 'he' looks: *'Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind'* (1.5.299). At first, Viola is horrified that she might have attracted Olivia: *'Fortune forbid my outside have not charmed her!'* (2.2.18), but then she begins to feel sorry for her, knowing it will be unrequited: *'Poor lady, she were better love a dream./Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness'* (2.2.26-7). Furthermore, she recognises the trouble that her disguise is causing. There is also dramatic irony in her feelings of empathy with Olivia, since they are both women: *'Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,/For such as we are made, if such we be'* (2.2.31-2). As far as she is concerned, the feminine quality of frailty is a problem, and it is not their fault that they were born that way. But Viola is in a unique position whereby she can understand a man loving another, yet she is also a woman, loved, albeit unwittingly, by another woman.

It makes for an amusing twist when she is able to tell Orsino of her love for another, and he does not detect that he is the person in question. It is rather far-fetched, when she is talking about all the similarities: *'Of your complexion'* (2.4.26); *'About your years, my lord'* (2.4.28), yet ironic when he says that the person Viola is in love with is not worth her bother.

The misunderstanding between Olivia and Viola continues with the latter trying to avoid her advances without disclosing the truth. This becomes increasingly hard for her to do as Olivia attempts to give her gifts, and appeals to her, in the hope of making Cesario fall in love.

MALE VERSUS FEMALE

Again, Viola's gender becomes a major issue when Sir Toby and Sir Andrew act aggressively towards her, and Sir Andrew wants to fight. She protests: *'I am no fighter'* (3.4.237), saying *'I care not who knows so much of my mettle'* (3.4.266), and she believes that if she had fought: *'A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man'* (3.4.293-4). By the end, all the confusion results from the gender reversal. However, once the truth is out, Orsino reveals his true feeling for Viola: *'Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times/Thou shouldst never love woman like to me'* (5.1.264-5).

Curiously enough, not only does this particular play revolve largely around the female characters, none of the men seem to be very sympathetic, let alone heroic at all, even Sebastian. Orsino is something of a diletannte, and all the male members of Olivia's household simply provide comic relief. It is Viola who steals the show throughout the play, although, just as Portia does in the key scene in The Merchant of Venice, it is the result of her appearance as a man.

EXERCISE

Does Viola handle the power she has over the other characters correctly?

OTHER FEMALE ROLES

THE QUEEN

In Hamlet, the Queen Gertrude is rather an ambiguous character. Generally, Queens do not play a leading role, but obviously Gertrude is central to the plot because of her actions. She proved she was not a loyal and honest wife, not only by remarrying so swiftly after the death of her husband, but wedding his brother, who becomes king. Throughout the play she appears to be weak, easily led, naïve at best, deceitful at worst. She could be said to be redeemed by her love for her son, but other than her passion for Claudius, she shows little feelings towards the other characters, apart from her sorrow at the death of Ophelia.

The Queen's actions have a devastating effect on Hamlet, who appears to have adored both his parents. He is horrified by her behaviour, and although she is not solely to blame, it contributes greatly to his madness, whether feigned or real, and the consequent results. When Hamlet confronts her, she is terrified of him, mainly because of his hallucinations, which she can't see: *'This is the very coinage of your brain./This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in'* (3.4.139-41), and attempts to explain his madness.

The Queen reveals her frailty to Hamlet when he verbally attacks her about the way she has behaved: *'What shall I do?'* (3.4.182). She is too pitiful and passive to seem threatening, despite her past behaviour. Nevertheless, with such secondary characters, this sometimes proves more dangerous, because they are unaware of the potentially disastrous effects of their actions.

THE WITCH

Far from being heroines, witches are still interesting female characters. The Weird Sisters are integral to the plot of Macbeth, as important an influence as Lady Macbeth, and a prime example of how women with power were viewed.

The famous quote *'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'* (1.1.10) alludes to the perverse way in which they find good things bad, and bad things good, but it is also the initial link with Macbeth, since one of the first things he says is: *'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'* (1.3.38). The question of femininity is introduced when Banquo comments: *'you should be women,/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so'* (1.3.45-7). It is not their looks with which they beguile the men, but their words and prophecies, and because Macbeth takes their promises more seriously, it leads to his downfall.

He eventually relies on them, just as he would prefer to rely on fate and superstition rather than reality. Their prophecies become deliberately ambiguous, but Macbeth doesn't search for hidden meanings because he doesn't believe they will deceive him. They are a huge influence on him because they work on his weakness and appeal to his ambition.

OTHER FEMALE ROLES

THE WHORE

A particular stereotype which is applied regularly to some women, but not always in the true sense of the meaning. None of Shakespeare's heroines are whores, but in many of his plays, there are several examples of such accusations, and this is most evident in Othello.

Here, one of the minor characters is Bianca, Cassio's prostitute, and her function is primarily to create the misunderstanding between Cassio and Othello, as a part of Iago's plot. After Iago begins to poison Othello's mind, he says he will question Cassio about Desdemona, but speaks to him of Bianca, to draw comparisons between the two women. Conversely, she highlights Desdemona's virtues as a loyal wife.

Paradoxically, the only insults concerning a woman's fidelity in the play are aimed at Desdemona. First of all, Iago slyly criticises her: *'And I'll warrant her full of game'* (2.3.19). However, Othello's insults become worse in his rage: *'Damn her, lewd minx'* (3.3.482).

MAIDS AND CONFIDANTES

One common denominator in all of the female characters described in this study is that none of them have a mother. However, there is generally somebody who has a similar function in looking after the heroine and acting as her confidante: the maid. When Shakespeare's heroines are seen through the eyes of these secondary characters, we learn more about them.

In Othello, Emilia plays a significant role, considering she is such a minor character, and serves a number of purposes, as a motherly figure to Desdemona, and also a contrast to her charge's character. She is more worldly and cynical, especially in her views about husbands and fidelity, and yet, as the doting wife, she unwittingly betrays her mistress by giving Iago Desdemona's handkerchief, an important device in his plot. At the end, however, she proves she is a loyal maid. As soon as she realises what her husband had been plotting, she does all she can to ensure that the truth will come out, only to be killed in the process.

Lady Macbeth has no such confidante, but during the important sleepwalking scene, the audience witnesses the loyalty of her gentlewoman. Her feelings of compassion are clear, because she has not only called out a doctor to help her mistress, but asks him not to repeat what he sees and hears Lady Macbeth doing. This is one of the very few times where the Queen is seen in a sympathetic light.

Ophelia is the exception in this study, since she does not appear to have a maid. The lack of a confidante further represses her when faced with problems, leaving her lonely and unable to fully articulate her concerns. The only people she can really talk to are her father and brother, which is not of use to her because of the circumstances. All her attempts to discuss matters with Hamlet are disastrous, and this failure in communication adds to the tragedy.

OTHER FEMALE ROLES

THE COMEDIES

In The Merchant of Venice, Portia's co-conspiritor is Nerissa, and their dialogues enable us to learn what Portia is planning. The maid is intrepid enough to dress up as a doctor, to support her mistress when she takes on the role of lawyer. To a certain extent, there is a parallel to Portia's romance with Bassanio, with Nerissa's relationship with Gratiano providing some of the humour.

However, just as Shakespeare's clowns may be wiser than their masters, so some of the servants may in fact be more important, and often livelier, than the leading characters. A good example of this is in The Twelfth Night, in which Viola, as the servant of Orsino, is involved in most of the action. Again, their relationship is mirrored by that of Olivia and her maid, Maria. The two subordinates are often given considerably more interesting dialogue than the indolent Duke and his somewhat neurotic 'Beloved'. Maria, in fact, controls the sub-plot, responsible for concocting the devious plan to bring down the pompous steward Malvolio and make him look foolish in the eyes of their mistress.

EXERCISE

What is the significance of such minor characters?