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Suicide so Sublime: Observations on Shakespearean Heroines and Others

Ajanta Dutt

Abstract

Death stalks Shakespearean tragedies where suicides of principal feminine characters reveal moral victory and an escape into sublimity. These scenes present psychological nuances of love, betrayal and resurrection of the tragic heroines whose suicides act as a rejection of the oppressive patriarchal society surrounding them. It is an act of conscious heroism as opposed to an accidental incident for persons of unbalanced mind. This paper analyses decisions made by Shakespeare's leading ladies related to their courage and other sentiments in their death scenes which are significant in an age where heroism was the precinct of the hero dying in battle.

Keywords: Femininity; Honour; Selfhood; Sublimity.

Introduction

Shakespeare's tragedies have a collective of 13 suicides with 8 more-deaths that could be termed such. There is the moral question of sin connected with the act that comes from medieval Christian doctrine. Th is stems from the Commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill." It is stretched to include the self, and therefore murder of the self. The plays by the Renaissance humanists, however, saw suicide as an honourable choice—decisive death rather than dishonor. Shakespeare presents the paradox of suicide, especially in the representation of his heroines and other ladies in his tragedies where suicide gives them all a sense of sublime selfhood. Thus, they empower themselves to commit the act such that the audience can feel for them pity rather than reproach, and even admire them for gaining freedom from captivity. Over the centuries, Shakespeare's tragic heroines have acquired significance as they deliberately take their own lives, on-stage and off-stage, which leads them towards salvation and immortality. "The prospect of death and the necessity of preparing for that

great event…. An awareness of death is omnipresent in Shakespeare," writes Bevington (177). The heroines are able to make self-ordered choices and execute their ends quite admirably.

Cleopatra

Shakespeare defines that to die or not to die is a deliberate choice and his heroines choose to die! He exemplifies this most clearly through Cleopatra where she takes complete control of her death scene, dressing like a Queen to upset the laws of patriarchy and defeat the machinations of Octavius Caesar. She orders her ladies: "Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have / Immortal longings in me…/ Methinks I hear / Antony call; I see him rouse himself / To praise my noble act" (*Ant. & Cleo*, V.ii.278-83).

Cleopatra's desire for Antony to laud her for this decision is coupled with her confidence that she is on her way to Paradise which makes her choice less tragic and more sublime. For her, it is less problematic than the reverse option of submitting to Caesar, and therefore infinitely more powerful. A.C. Bradley notes that "Many unpleasant things canbe said of Cleopatra; and the more that are said the more wonderful she appears" (13).Velma Richard emphasizes that through Cleopatra, Shakespeare achieves his "finestembracing of the feminine," as she surmounts her capricious and sometimes whimsical cruelty to become the dominating spirit of the play in her death scene (qtd. in Das 43). Cleopatra dies in true Roman fashion, very much a Queen with regal powers. She affirms her courage and rationality when she says "I have nothing/ Of woman in me. Now from head to foot/ I am marble constant" (V.ii.235-37). This self-empowerment acts as a rejection of earlier images when she was compared to the changeability of the moon,often symbolic of whimsicality, mental instability and weakness in women. Cleopatrasays that she embraces instead the elements of air and fire. In fact this depicts the androgynous quality of Cleopatra. She quickly reaffirms the image of sensual lover and wife, overlaid by feminine qualities of mother as she takes the asps to her breast: "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep? (V.ii.308-9).

She is strong enough to harness her own fate and even Caesar is compelled to express his admiration of the beautiful queen when he sees her dead. If suicide had connotations of shame and despair, Cleopatra is able to transform it to a perfectly executed, well chosen act—one that in no way hampers her physical grace:

My desolation does begin to make a better life.

. . . And it is great

To do that thing that ends all other deeds,

Which shackles accidents and bolts up change… (V.ii.1-6)

The lyricism of Shakespearean language rises to a crescendo in this scene and there is the polysemic utterance of the word "die" which is interrupted by the entrance of the rustic fellow carrying the "pretty worm of Nilus" concealed in a basket (V.ii.42. Cleopatra goes from the humorous word play to the intense preparation of her own death, never forgetting her vanity or her jealousy of Iras who may reach Antony in Elysium before herand thus claim his kiss. We are never really sure whether her death is for love and possessiveness of Antony or for political reasons. She even expresses her insecurity in leaving Antony for too long because he may wander away from her. The triple suicide of Cleopatra and her two hand-maidens, Iras and Charmian imply that they are loyal to their mistress and must accompany her into after-life; or alternatively they too refuse to fall into the hands of the enemy Roman soldiers who will make them their slaves and concubines. Charmian\s last words for her mistress are a tribute to honour and lineage: "It is well done, and fitting for a princess/ Descended of so many royal Kings" (V.ii.324-5).

Paramount is the fact she is able to escape indignity as Caesar's prisoner and have him declare: "No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous" (V.ii.356-7). In fact, the play has been termed a "passionate surrender to illicit love, the victory of this love over practical, political and moral concerns, and the final superiority of the suicide lovers over circumstances" (Wimsatt Jr. 96). It is the complex victory of a voluptuous queen thattakes her and the play beyond immorality into immortality. Middleton Murry analyses that Shakespeare gives to the dying queen purity and simplicity of words that is nothing short of "the miracle" (235).

Juliet: If *Antony and Cleopatra* is about the valorization of illicit love, then *Romeo and Juliet* expresses the purest and most sincere romantic love, although the lovers are too young and too impetuous to sustain it. Realization of the self, especially for Juliet is attached to accepting the possibility of death. Julia Kristeva describes their love as "ephemeral happiness," because the young lovers "spend less time loving each other than getting ready to die" (210). Juliet develops courage and maturity in the passage of a few days when she moves from being a dutiful daughter to choosing

suicide in order to unite with Romeo.

Like Cleopatra in the first instance when Antony believes that the worst has happened,Juliet too fakes her own death with the blessings of the Friar. Although she is afraid of being entombed, she vows to "do it without fear or doubt, to live an unstained wife to [her] sweet love" (*Rom & Jul*, IV.i.87-8). She is ready to leap from the towered battlements or keep company with snakes and ferocious bears to escape from the duress of marrying Paris. It is a pity that as she regains consciousness from the sleeping potion, the Friar hears the sound of an approaching guard and deserts her. Neither can Romeo contain his impassioned grief and impatience when he finds the 'dead' Juliet, and peremptorily drinks the poison.

Thus when her sleep breaks and she sees Romeo, dead, lying beside her, she uses a paucity of words to make the ultimate decision of her life: "Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger! This is my sheath; there rust, and let me die" (170). Juliet dies with utmost calm and loyalty, choosing Romeo's dagger to lead her to eternity when she cannot take the poison from his lips.

Death follows the young lovers through the play; even Capulet seems to have a premonition and proclaims to Paris in an earlier scene, "Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir; / my daughter he hath wedded" (IV.v.34-5). Juliet's mind is made up long before the end for when she hears of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, she says: "I'll to my wedding bed; / And death not Romeo, take my maidenhead" (III. ii.136-7). Although Juliet's suicide is not acceptable in a Christian society, her love is completely legitimate as it has been consummated only after their secret marriage. Thus the audience is left with no moral question to conflict with the sorrowful ending of the play.

Catherine Spurgeon attests that "young love is seen by Shakespeare as the irradiating glory of sunlight and starlight in a dark world" (qtd. Muir 96). For a long while Death has been Romeo's rival, but when finally Juliet seeks Death with an absolutely sound mind (startling for a girl of fourteen), she controls her own fate fully. She leaves behind the warring Capulets and Montagues to make their own peace and reflect on their own sins.

Lady Macbeth

Death and her conscience stalk Lady Macbeth to the very end, until she can make her confession in the Sleep-walking scene. Although she has partic-

ipated in the murder of Duncan only, she seems to take upon herself the responsibility of the murders of Banquo and Lady Macduff too. As her unsexed energy and malevolent ambition begin to fail her, her mind succumbs to disease and degeneration. Critics and actors see her as a dedicated wife abandoned and needing deliverance. Laura Engel confirms that her "ultimate demise is the result of the sacrifices that she made for her husband" (251). Mrs. Siddons transformed Lady Macbeth on stage from a she-demon into a grieving lady who must self-destruct. She writes in her Remarks that she has " perseveringly endured in silence the uttermost anguish of a wounded spirit" and "her frailer frame, and keener feelings, have now sunk under the struggle" (qtd. in Engel 252). Mrs. Siddons also describes her "wasted form, with wan and haggard countenance, her starry eyes glazed with the ever-burning fever of remorse, and on their lids the shadow of death" (Remarks, 2:31; qtd. in Engel 251).

When Lady Macbeth enters with a lighted taper because she is now afraid of the dark, the Doctor realizes she is beyond help, and her guilt-ridden words are a Christian confession of a murky past. The scene comes as a warning f her death, stricken by remorse in hersub-conscious mind, seeking redemption where there can be none. When the doctor tells her Gentlewoman to remove from her reach the "means of all annoyance" he anticipates what she will do (*Mac.,* V.ii.74). We are not sure whether she falls down a chasm or throws herself from the battlements into the courtyard below, but she dies violently, by her own hand. Her existence after Banquo's murder is a disintegrating social space. Her commanding presence and the rhetoric of her speeches have disintegrated into staccato, childlike, half-formed sentences; there is no more verse… she speaks now in prose. Andshe can no longer survive in her solitary state. She has demanded an identity alongside Macbeth, and it is pitifully ironic that she is called Queen just twice in the play, and both times in the last act when she is already dead. Seyton says to Macbeth, "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (V.v.16); and again the title is repeated when Malcolm refers to Macbeth and his Lady as "this dead butcher, and his fiend-like Queen" (V.ix.35). In the final analysis, Belsey pities that "villainous Lady Macbeth is at the same time the victim of a humanism which makes humanity synonymous with man, and which cannot in consequence afford to let women live" (265).

Ophelia

Over the last 400 years, Ophelia has moved from the margins of criticism to the centre of Shakespearean discourse. She is the most represented

feminine character among Shakespeare's heroines to enter the other art forms, most vividly in painting. Recently, feminine critics have given her a life after Hamlet, an identity and a self that sees her madness as incurred by conflict and stress. This provides her with a selfhood balanced on an alternate choice and empowerment. The virginal white of her dress, the roses in her hair, the rosemary of remembrance that she offers in her last appearance, alive in the play and then the effect of drowning has caused feminist critics to give her a tragic identity all her own. Her selfhood shows her as a victim of the romantic imagination. Anna Jameson feels "eloquence is mute before her" and in writing about her, critics seem to snatch: "The love of Ophelia, which she never once confesses, [is] like a secret which we have stolen for from her" (154-55).

She has become a symbol of protest against gender stereotypes due to her innate sexuality and possibility of incestuous attraction to both Polonius and Laertes, her family members.Dusinberre believes that Ophelia has no chance to develop an independent conscience of her own, so stifled is she by the authority of the male world" (94). In one modern adaptation, she even becomes a suicide bomber.

Unlike other Shakespearean heroes, Hamlet cannot be held entirely responsible for his own tragedy but he is certainly guilty of extreme cruelty to Ophelia in the 'nunnery scene' as callously uses her as an instrument for his revenge plans. She fears he has lost his reason as she cries out for herself, "And I of ladies, most deject and wretched / That sucked honey of his music vows ... / O woe is me" (*Ham,* III.ii.155-60).

His hyperbolic protestations of undying love at her graveside are open to much debate. Ophelia bears the brunt of Hamlet's disillusionment with his mother, Queen Gertrude, and in fact Ophelia becomes a primary victim of the patriarchic attitudes of all the men in her life. Rather than protect her, they drive her to the brink, and even if falling into the stream was an accident, it is evident that she did nothing to save herself from drowning. The audience receives an eye-witness account of Ophelia's death from the Queen herself:

> There on the pendant boughes, her Coronet weeds
>
> Clambring to hang; an enuious sliuer broke,
>
> When downe the Weedy Trophies, and her selfe,
>
> Fell in the weeping Brooke, her cloathes spred wide,

> And Mermaid-like, a while they bore her vp,
>
> Which time she chaunted snatches of old tunes,
>
> As one incapable of her owne distresse,
>
> Or like a creature Natiue, and indued
>
> Vnto that Element but long it could not be,
>
> Till that her garments, heauy with her drinke,
>
> Pul'd the poore wretch from her melodious lay,
>
> To muddy death. (As reproduced in the First Folio of 1623, IV. viii.167-83)

One cannot help but wonder why the Queen or her attendants did nothing to save Ophelia from being drowned? Other questions related to accident versus suicide claim are: was she so gone in her madness that she could do nothing to save herself; or was the madness an escape route to take her own life? There is almost a withholding of a Christian burial for Ophelia, and in the grave-diggers' scene the circumstances of her death seem to clearly point towards suicide.

Another niggling doubt remains in Queen Gertrude's motivations too underlying her detailed description of Ophelia's demise. Although Ophelia's mercenary father was looking out for a royal match for his daughter, would the Queen really have been happy with such a match for Hamlet? Even if she had not deliberately put Ophelia out of reachof her son's attentions, perhaps she was she ultimately pleased or rather relieved that it had happened.

Ophelia's death closes any transgressions seen in her character before, but she is certainly not dismissible as A. C. Bradley would have us believe. Although her end hastens the tragic end of the play, perfumed flower imagery surrounds her death. Laertes commands the pall bearers to put her in the grave with the words "And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring" (V.i.233-34) When the Queen scatters flowers into the grave, she says she is giving "sweets to the sweet" (V.i.238)

C. S. Lewis traces Hamlet's most famous lines of hesitancy to "the fear of death; not to a physical fear of dying, but a fear of being dead" (72). Oph-

elia however surpasses him in that fear. Although he may have driven her to it, she stages her own death most perfectly. Elaine Showalter reminds us that Ophelia has captured the imagination of the audiences completely and it was rumoured that great actresses who played Ophelia were also unhappy in love. This included actor Susan Mountfort who apparently went mad after she was betrayed by her lover.

Showalter notes that "For most critics of Shakespeare, Ophelia has been an insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weakness and madness but chiefly interesting of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet" (220). Moreover, the Elizabethans would have diagnosed her problem as "erotomania." For women, the disease had biological and emotional origins. However, when it became fashionable for young men like Hamlet to suffer from the malady of melancholia, it had clear associations with "intellectual and imaginative genius which had curiously bypassed women" (Showalter 225-9). This attitude and its subsequent debates challenging a patriarchal discourse is what make Ophelia a full-fledged heroine today.

Charney Maurice suggests that during the Renaissance, women's madness was 'interpreted as something specifically feminine', and depictions of madness in plays gave women characters a chance to express their selfhood - 'make a forceful assertion of their being" (451-459). Charney further argues that only "imaginative women have the capacity for true or feigned madness" (459). Patriarchal conventions would otherwise-have prevented her mind from blossoming in her own right.Yi-Chi Chen shows that her death symbolizes the Narcissus-like combination of her own images and the opportunity to recover her name with Gertrude's narration which belongs specifically to the kind of female mourning: "It renders her a proper burial" (18).

Reflecting on the Romantic Era, Helena Faucit Martin who longed to play Ophelia from her childhood felt it was perhaps because of the "mystery of her madness" (4). She says that she feels pained to hear Ophelia described as "a weak creature, wanting in truthfulness, in purpose in force of character, and only interesting when she loses the little wits she had. And yet who can wonder that a character so delicately outlined and shaded in with touches so fine, should be often gravely misunderstood" (3) Although she was never a major character of the play in the past, today her action is filled with complexity. She protests even as she self-destructs. Once the oppression of the male world is broken, she merges into water and can rest in peace. "The rest is silence" (V.ii.300).

Portia

Like Macbeth in his most significant speech, "Tomorrow and tomorrow…" which follows Lady Macbeth's death, Brutus too submits to philosophical rhetoric when he learns of Portia's suicide by swallowing fire: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, / Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries" (*Jul C.*,, IV.iii.216-19). The two reports of her death in Julius Caesar give Brutus the opportunity to amply exhibit his stoic calm. The silence of the terrible loss is evident when he tells Cassius, "Speak no more of her" (IV. iii.156). To Messala he says, "With meditating that she must die once, / I have the patience to endure it now" (IV.iii.189-90).

David Bevington writes that "Portia is like her father in personal integrity" (158). Cato the Younger committed suicide to avoid falling into the tyrannical hands of Julius Caesar. Portia's end is unseen; the audience is told that she, with "her attendants absent, swallowed fire" (IV.iii.154). This is because she cannot see the shameful defeat of Brutus in the hands of Antony and Octavius Caeser. Not only is this a very courageous death but extremely painful too. By choosing to die before there is any actual communication of downfall from her husband suggests that she is realistic and perhaps she has also internalized some part of Brutus' regret in killing Caesar. Portia, it must be remembered,was Calpurnia's friend. She probably sees the breakdown of their perfect marital relationship when Brutus refuses to confide in her. This is similar to the loneliness Lady Macbeth experiences as Macbeth proceeds towards other murders without her aid. While her degeneration is terrible and pitiful, Portia's end is truly honourable in accordance withhigh Roman fashion.

Goneril, finally, is represented as thoroughly evil, as much a queen of darkness as is Lady Macbeth—but with nothing of the latter's human frailty. Goneril cannot awaken anything but fear and a sense of justice in the audience. M. D. Faber in his essay "Some remarks on the Suicide of King Lear's Eldest Daughter" describes Goneril in bitter terms: "void of innocence, cruel, cunning, Machiavellian, murderous" (qtd. in Cupitt 4). Lear himself calls his daughters "she-foxes" when he realizes how he has been betrayed by their cunning and crafty natures (King Lear, III.vi.22).

There is no catharsis, not even pity for Goneril. That is reserved for Cordelia. The suggestion that Goneril may have died for love is fleeting, and she remains condemned. Edmund imagines that she "poison'd [her sister] for my sake, / And after slew herself" (V.iii. 236-7). But he is

quite mistaken. She took control of her own death as she was aware that she was on the brink of arrest for treason. Marianne L. Novy is partially apologetic for the ugly behaviour of the sisters but does suggest that Shakespeare made them "much less psychologically complex…. Few of their lines carry hints of motivations other than cruelty, lust or ambition, characteristics of archetypal fantasy image of woman as enemy" (85-95). Succumbing to her lust for Edmund necessitates thatshe kill her equally cruel sister Reagan. She lays herself open to attack in Albany's speech when he wishes to tear her apart with his bare hands: "They are apt enough to dislocate and tear/ Thy flesh and bones: howe'er thou art a fiend/ A woman's shape doth shield thee" (IV.ii.65-7)

In giving in to her possessive attraction for Edmund, she loses all her manly strength and power. Her most conclusive lines are, "I had rather lose the battle than that sister/ Should loosen him and me" (V.i.18-9). Thus she can no longer redeem herself even through her death because she her unholy passion for Edmund has already silenced her. Kathleen McLuskie agrees that Shakespeare's representation of "patriarchal misogyny" is most obvious in the treatment of Goneril and Regan (24-48). While Goneril's death "Touches us not with pity" (V.iii.231), we must admit that her self-awareness causes her to escape when she sees she has lost her queenly power.

Shakespearean Heroes

Although Cassius and Brutus both commit suicide, they need assistance with the act. Cassius assumes that the battle is lost and insists that his slave,Pandarus keep the oath he has taken and therefore, must stab his master. This Pandarus does as ordered. Just a little later, Brutus realizes that his time too has come because the ghost of Julius Caesar has visited him. He tries to get Clitus, Dardanius and Volumnius to kill him, but they all flee. Brutus finally inveigles Strato to help him by holding up the sword upon which he falls. Antony however redeems the deed by calling Brutus "the noblest Roman of them all" (*Jul C.*, V.v.68).

However, Antony later botches up his own death when he hears that Cleopatra has killed herself. Like Romeo, he is impatient and does nothing to verify whether the news is true. He moreover makes the following comparative statement: "condemn myself to lack/ The courage of a woman; less noble mind/ than she which by her death our Caeser tells/ 'I am conquerer of myself' (*Ant & Cleo.*, IV.xiv.51-53). He then insists that his henchman Eros must kill him, but Eros turns away and kills himself instead. Antony even falls upon his sword but cannot inflict the fatal

wound. When Decretas and the other guards arrive, he begs them to finish him off; but they merely take away his sword for Octavius to see. Finally Diomedes arrives and takes him to the monument where Cleopatra is waiting--and Antony dies there. It is a long drawn out, fairly messy death indeed!

Romeo makes a similar mistake when told of the death of Juliet. The message from Friar Lawrence has not reached him so he goes to the apothecary for a vial of poison and comes to Juliet's vault. One may wonder why he needs poison to die when he has a dagger at his waist which incidentally Juliet uses upon herself when she finds the dead Romeo beside her.

Even Macbeth is startled into cowardice on the battlefield when he is confronted by Macduff who is not of woman born. He curses the witches who "palter with us in double sense" and says in his moment of weakness, "Ill not fight with thee" (V.viii.20-22). Mercifully, he refuses to yield and he dies offstage—fighting!

Conclusion

Renaissance culture had constructed a definition for a woman, especially of her role as wife. Shakespeare was thus intent on presenting her feminine virtues especially in her relationship to men. Although most of his leading ladies played strong, androgynous roles, their lines spoke of obedience, chastity, piety and patience. To affect the cross-over between men and women in appearance was easy because in the Elizabethan times, young boys were playing the roles of the women. But when the men were unable to mitigate the problematic gender relationships emphasized primarily by political problems, the women were allowed to escape—in the only way known to them. This could then reconstitute the natural order in society.

Therefore, there is perfection in the execution of the act of suicide that sets Shakespeare's ladies apart from his heroes. There is less indecision, more purpose. Pragati Das feels that the Shakespearean ladies were pitted against "social stigma" and the playwright could not help himself but reveal "his personal admiration for intelligent, strong women, using virtues and strength" and he should be thought of as "one of the pioneers of the feminist movement" (55). The women are certainly empowered and become living spirits of the play, even when they disappear much before the end, or appear in 5 of 20 scenes as Ophelia does. For none of them does it tarnish their reputation of strength—not even in the case of Goneril. In fact it shows them performing a last valiant act of protest, an act of

defiance that leads to a resolution of a problem. It must be noted that in an intensely male, Elizabethan world, there is no one left to take care of any of these women. Thus they must take care of themselves—and otherwise, disappear.

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