
**IDEOLOGICAL PUPPETS: A LACANIAN-ALTHUSSERIAN ANALYSIS OF
WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES**

Arash Rahmani

Shahid Beheshti University

Postal Address: No. 8, Dr. Hesabi Street, Molvai Avenue, Sanandaj, Kurdistan, Iran.

Postal Code: 66166-34741

Marjan Khodamoradpour

Shiraz University

ABSTRACT: *There is no consensus regarding Shakespeare's attitudes towards women. Some, like James Shapiro, deem him "the most noble feminist of them all" [sic] (270), whereas others like David Mann argue that he had a "scant concern" for the feelings of women (22). Whichever might be the case, it is often argued that Shakespeare's rendering of women in his tragedies differs drastically from the way he has portrayed the heroines of his comedies. The reason for this double standard could be analyzed in the context of Shakespearean drama and the attitudes of the Renaissance society towards women. This paper intends to argue that the reason for this incongruity stems from the way that women were socially constructed in the era and as much culturally conditioned. To find out the underlying base of this construction, this study endeavors to examine the subjectivity of women in Shakespeare's tragedies through the Lacanian- Althusserian dialectic of identity formation. What this paper seeks to accomplish is to demonstrate that the Lacanian-Althusserian dialectic provides a more comprehensive and lucrative explanation for the process of subject formation than just a psychoanalytical or structuralist Marxist approach. The Lacanian-Althusserian dialectic focuses on the close affinity between the Lacanian notion of linguistic alienation and the misperceived identity of the infantile period, and the Althusserian concept of ideological interpellation and the claim regarding individuals' being "always already subjects" in society. After applying these notions to the women who populate his tragedies, this study aims at positing that these women are the pure embodiment of the ideological values of their epoch, ideologies that deprive of them of any autonomy and individuality.*

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, Tragedies, Lacan, Althusser, Subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

As Aristotle has put it, tragedy is greater than comedy in a number of ways. He defines tragedy as such: "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude," which is presented "in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions" (qtd. In Rorty, 380). Tragedy imitates serious action, and this is the reason why it is sometimes considered as a genuine reflection of a society (Euben, 44).

The issue of the misrepresentation of women in tragedies is not something specific to Shakespeare's era. The Athenian tragedies, which were the first in their kind, were also harsh to women in real life and their presence on stage (Goldhill, 65). Moreover, even such educated

minds as Aristotle went further, stating that “women were deformed, incomplete males, designed to be subservient to men” (Cartledge, 27).

Therefore, in order to be able to talk about Shakespeare’s tragedies and the role of women in them, it’s imperative that one takes a brief review of what a typical Renaissance society thought of women. In order to do so, one could turn to many a different writer who have tried to chronicle the conditions of women in England during that period. There are many different writers who have written on the stance of Elizabethan society towards women. For instance, Thomas Elyot, one of the influential writers of the period, in his 1531 *The Boke Named Governour* has written that “[a] man in his naturall perfection is fiers, hardy, stronge in opinion, covaitous of glorie, desirous of knowledge, appetiting by generation to bring forth his semblable. The good nature of a woman is to be milde, timerouse, tractable, benigne, of sure remembrance and shamfast.” (Italics Mine).

Yet another example that can shed greater light on the attitudes of the Renaissance England towards women is the writings of Sir Thomas Smith, another influential writer of the period, in whose 1589 *Common-welth of England*, he has also touched upon the role of women in society:

Then if this be a societie, and consisteth onely of freeman, the least part thereof must be of two. The naturelest, and, first conjunction of two . . . is of the husband and of the wife, after a divers sort, each having care of the familie: the man to get, to travaile abroad, to defende: *the wife, to save that which is gotten, to tarie at home, to distribute that which commeth of the husbandes labor, for the nutriture of the children, and family of them both, and to keepe all at home neate and cleane.* (Italics Mine)

From the excerpts chosen here, which of course are two among many, one can manifestly observe that women in the Renaissance period were supposed to be, among other things, timid, obedient and willing to accept the rules of the patriarchal system which partakes of every resource available to it in order to “construct women” so as to restrict them in a pre-defined position.

THE LACANIAN-ALTHUSSERIAN DIALECTIC OF IDENTITY FORMATION

As previously mentioned, both Lacan and Althusser are very much concerned with how “pre-subjects” become subjects, one from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, the other from a structuralist Marxist one. Lacan’s theories of subjectivity are best explained in his explanation of the three stages a child goes through, namely, the mirror stage, the imaginary and also the symbolic realm (Harari, 86). For Lacan, as Terry Eagleton argues, as the boy enters the symbolic stage, which is analogous to the oedipal part of Freud’s Theory, he submits to the Law of the Father, and “[i]f he is not a patriarch now, he will be later...” and then the boy “is thus introduced into the symbolic role of manhood” interestingly “with the unconscious consolation though he cannot *now* hope to oust his father and possess his mother, his father symbolizes a place, a possibility, which he himself will be able to take up and realize in the future.” Eagleton continues to say that “the boy will now grow up within those images and practices which his society happens to define as ‘masculine’. The same applies to girls. She will be constructed as a woman with the characteristics that society happens to label as “feminine.” He, later on, says that “the Oedipal complex [Lacan’s entrance to the symbolic

stage] is for Freud the *beginnings of morality, conscience, law and all forms of social and religious authority*" (134-136, Italics Mine).

The following could be said to be the tenets of Lacan's theory about children, language and the Law of the Father, which pertain to the present study:

- "For Lacan, it is only when the child accedes to castration and the Law of the father, that s/he becomes fully competent as a language-speaker within his/her given social collective."
- "Lacan's position is that to learn a language is to learn a set of rules or laws for the use and combination of words."
- "Lacan argues that the subject is "the subject of the signifier." One meaning of this claim at least is that there is no subject proper that is not a speaking subject, who has been subject to castration and the law of the father."
- "There is no subject without language, Lacan wants to say, and yet the subject constitutively lacks a place in language." (Sharpe, Lacan at IEP)

Althusser, as much as Lacan, is obsessed with how a subject enters the society, although he focuses on the issue from an ideological perspective. Althusser, in "Ideology and Ideological state Apparatuses", sets on two conjoint theses: "1- There is no practice except by and in an ideology" and "2- There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects," and then he tries to argue that "[i]deology interpellates individuals as subjects." Althusser argues that individuals are "always already interpellated;" what he means by this is that subjects are born to societies and not in vacuum, therefore, there are always certain rules and concerns into which individuals are born. He says that ideology "recruits subjects among the individuals...by the very act of interpellation," and that Ideology addresses the individuals in the most intimate manner and tells them how to be. Althusser considers Ideology as eternal, and that's why he claims that individuals "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects" and this leads to his final decree that "*individuals are always-already subjects*" even before s/he is born. Althusser goes on to say that the unborn child is expected in advance that "it will bear its father's name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable," (697-700).

As Jose Medina has put it:

Althusser has offered a powerful account of the formation of the identity through the address of the other. The centerpiece of this account is the notion of interpellation. Althusser characterizes the phenomenon of interpellation as a kind of hailing that has the formative power of configuring one's identity in a particular way and of making one accept this concrete configuration as what one is. The interpellation to which individuals are subject are determined by the dominant ideology. (168)

This is what Althusser means by interpellation: that a subject is always hailed "into a position" by the dominant ideology of an era (Wolfreys, 96). Numerous critics have touched upon the ramifications that this union between these two great thinkers will bring about. For example, Celia Britton focuses on, like other critics, the Althusserian concept of interpellation and argues that it "happens when the subject is already a subject in Lacan," and then considers the Lacanian and Althusserian theories of the subject as two theories that were most significantly influential in "the transition of structuralism to post-structuralism." She contends that "both theories challenged the idealist perception of the subject as free, decision maker, ad autonomous, and, hence, they presented an anti-humanist notion of the subject" (245).

The process of the examination will be as the following: women of Shakespeare's tragedies will be analyzed based on the typical beliefs of women in that time. The subject (here Women) is supposed to be ideologically constituted through language which is what connects Lacan and Althusser. The mechanism through which both language and ideology construct a subject never permits the subject enjoying a state of full identity, and therefore they aren't considered as autonomous subjects. The subject's identity is represented in the language exposed to and, later, reproduced by him/her. The process of the subject formation will be analyzed through the subject's alienation/interpellation.

DISCUSSION

Desdemona, Gertrude, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth and Cordelia with her two sisters are the women who tread the stage of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Ophelia: Ophelia is the beautiful daughter of Polonius, Laertes' sister, and Hamlet's love. Ophelia is portrayed in the play as caught between her obedience to her father and her love for Hamlet. Ophelia's obedience makes her the perfect embodiment of the role that 16th and 17th century women were required to perform (Findlay, 100).

As long as she lives with her father, she has to comply by his order. For instance, upon receiving orders that she can't visit Hamlet anymore, she stops her visits and says: "I shall obey my Lord." (1.4.10). Even later on in the play, she is used to spy on Hamlet, and it seems that she has no choice but to agree to do it. Ophelia, in particular, and most women in 16th century seemed to have no control over their bodies, relationships, and choices. They had to live by their fathers' rules before marriage, and by their husbands' after (Findlay, 312).

However, Ophelia describes herself as "deject and wretched" (3.1.13) after Hamlet calls her (and all women in general) "Breeders of sin." (3.1.9) Hamlet also abuses Ophelia after he finds out that she has a part in her father's spying and therefore orders her to "nunnery." (3.1.9). Hamlet's accusation goes so far as to comment on her marriage, saying that she would definitely turn her husband into a monster and cuckold. (3.1.10).

Ophelia's family, even her brother, are concerned with her sexuality. Her brother's lecture in the first act on the dangers of pre-marital affair instills a sense of "fear" in Ophelia's mind. The anatomy analogy of comparing the affair to a worm is representative and indicative of 16th century stance towards the issue. A deflowered girl was considered a damaged "product" no one would seek to purchase (Kemp, 87).

Ophelia seems to be suffering from the dominant patriarchal ideology that existed in 16th century, an ideology that is best presented by the two most important male figures in her life: her father and Hamlet. Therefore, it can be argued that her madness stems from living in a patriarchal society that has harsh views towards women. All the males in Ophelia's life put a great pressure on her, and that is why she cannot hold it anymore and loses her sanity.

Ophelia, as previously mentioned, is victim figure in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who is abused by her father, brother and Hamlet indeed. Some critics have argued that Hamlet is innocent in this tragedy because the "laws allowed for husbands [and other male figures] to beat their wives," (Kemp, 29). Concerning Ophelia, we certainly have to doubt his innocence. Elizabethan society, as we have already seen, wanted women to be obedient and if one of them ever wanted

to transgress the rules of the society, she'd be scoffed for the rest of her life. In short, Hamlet throughout the play uses Ophelia as a tool in his revenge plan.

One important note to keep in mind is the fact that Hamlet's understanding of femininity and women stems from his troubled relationship with Gertrude, who, by marrying Claudius on such short notice, leads Hamlet to believe that all women are unfaithful (Wright, 39).

Ophelia's death is also symbolic. Her death is reported to have been a passive one, i.e. she doesn't kill herself, but rather she falls into water by chance and then doesn't save herself. Gertrude is the one who reports her death. She describes her in her last moments as "incapable of her own distress," meaning that she could not do anything to save herself from drowning. This can be a symbol of the way Ophelia has lived throughout her whole life (Findlay, 294).

Gertrude: Gertrude is called "that incestuous and adulterate beast" (1.5.9) in the play by Hamlet. Gertrude's sexuality is a core theme of the play. Gertrude's "o'erhasty" marriage to Claudius seems to have shattered Hamlet's view on women (Wright, 39), so much so that he now believes that his world is like an "unweeded garden" that is "rank and gross in nature" (1.2.6). His irritation at what her mother has committed makes her generalize his hatred to all the women. He says: "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

Hamlet's obsession with his mother's deeds is endless. The ghost advises him not to focus on it so much by saying: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven" (1.5.9)...but he doesn't seem to be able to let it go.

Gertrude is Hamlet's Mother in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet resents her mother for marrying Claudius right after his father murder, and without proper mourning, and this leads to a turbulent relationship between the two (Findlay, 339). Hamlet's hatred grows towards his uncle as well, but he is unable to kill him. It is argued that Hamlet's inability to kill Claudius is an affirmation of his oedipal complex. Hamlet cannot kill his uncle because he has done exactly what Hamlet, in his oedipal stage, wanted to do, i.e. killing his father and marrying his mother. To verbalize it in the Lacanian terms, Claudius is the "other" for Hamlet and as Eagleton shows Lacan to have asserted, there's no "self" without the "other." Therefore, killing Claudius will be, in symbolic terms, killing himself (Jones, 108).

"She married. O, most wicked speed, to post / with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (1.2.208-209); these are Hamlet's words right after her mother marries Claudius. Although Hamlet still remembers his mother's love for his late father, he is confused and outraged at her "weakness," and therefore utters one of the most important lines of the play: "Frailty, thy name is woman!- / A little month, or e'er those shoes were old / With which she followed my poor father's body..." (1.2.198-200). Gertrude has been obedient to her previous husband, and after his passing, she's now ready again to yield to society's rules and conventions. As mentioned earlier, Althusser believed that individuals are subjects even before they're born, and applying this to Gertrude, it's very illuminating. Gertrude is not to blame, at least not as much as Hamlet believes her to be, because she chooses the only way she has; in other words, the society has taught her to behave like that and that's exactly what she does.

Desdemona: Desdemona is another tragic figure in Shakespeare's tragedies. She's young, and beautiful, and she's from a white family who are proud of her (Findlay, 103). Despite being obedient her whole life, she disobeys her father once and refuses to marry all the well-to-do suitors who ask for her hand. Instead, she marries a black guy, Othello. Her decision to marry

Othello is both a violation of her father's expectations and those of her society that disapproves of marriage between different races and ethnic groups, i.e. by marrying Othello secretly, she "steps outside of the prescribed behaviors that define[d] good women" in that era (Kemp, 88). The society's concerns with the issues of race, gender, and marriage are well represented in this work.

This disobedience, and Desdemona's wish that she were a male person show how she has revolted, and maybe been successful, against the issues that restricted women in her society. However, things don't turn out the way she expects them to. She is concerned with the issues of sex, and that's why she simple-mindedly asks Emilia if it's possible for a girl to cheat on her husband. When Othello finds out about this questions, he grows suspicious of Desdemona and starts torturing her. Desdemona's question was simply a rhetorical question because for her any act of adultery is simply unacceptable, but Othello misunderstands it and therefore abuses her both physically and verbally. Othello slaps her in the public and calls her a whore...She's finally strangled by Othello.

Her name, Desdemona, in Greek, means "unfortunate" and this may be very conscious on the part of Shakespeare (Findlay, 127). Desdemona, like the other female figures analyzed, is torn between the patriarchal rules of two main figures in the play, i.e. his father and Othello. By eloping with and marrying Othello she hopes to get away from such restraint as put upon her by her father, which is a symbolic gesture that signifies the getting away from the Lacanian notion of the "Law of Father," but she doesn't know that she is only succumbing to another male because from an Althusserian viewpoint, she's always already a "subject" in that society, and she has no choice but to comply by the patriarchal ruling system.

Iago tells Othello that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, and this brings about Othello's suspicion that leads to his abusing Desdemona. However, we should keep this fact in mind that Othello's suspicion might have started when Desdemona's father utters these words to him: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She hath deceived her father and may thee." (1.3) Here we can see how the patriarchal society to which Desdemona is born affects the way people think about him.

Gayle Greene summarizes this position in her claim that "the tragedy of Othello stems from "men's misunderstandings of women and women's inability to protect themselves from society's conception of them"" (665-666). Desdemona's unfit character, with such feminine qualities as tenderness, passivity, and obedience are in sharp contrast to Othello's masculine qualities of dominance, aggression and authority (Findlay, 51). Desdemona is helpless in facing Othello because she is surrounded by a society that strengthens the male viewpoint and weakens the female voice. Othello is willing to accept what Desdemona's father and Iago tell him, but he refuses to believe in Desdemona's innocence and pure love.

Lady Macbeth: Lady Macbeth is another female character in Shakespeare's play that is first presented as a powerful figure, but, as soon as Macbeth dethrones the king and usurps his throne, she is neglected altogether and is turned into a weak and fragile character that is loathed by everyone (Findlay, 239). For instance, she is the one who urges Macbeth to kill the king, but then when the king's corpse is discovered she faints.

She's also neglected and excluded altogether from all the decision makings afterwards. Macbeth's decision to murder Banquo is made without consulting her. She becomes so weak and enfeebled that she starts sleepwalking and talking in her dreams (5.1.1-6). Even the physicians can't do anything about her situation, and they believe that what she needs is a divine presence because "The disease," is beyond" the doctor's "practice," (5.1.12-13).

Lady Macbeth suffers from a psychological breakdown. Guilt takes over her because of the evil deeds she has perpetuated. Also, her transformation from a leading lady who shows signs of determination and even masculinity into an enfeebled woman can be very illuminating when we realize that this is a "natural" change to restore and reestablish the "natural" gender role and order in the play as a manifest representation of the society (Kemp 95-96). Lady Macbeth restores her place as a woman – she's no longer the dominant partner in her marriage. Macbeth makes all the decisions and he becomes the dominant patriarchal figure in the play. In the end, Lady Macbeth is forgotten completely. When Macbeth learns of her death, he says he has no "time" to think about her – "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.3).

Lady Macbeth, wife of Macbeth, is one of the battlefields in which Shakespeare's feminism has been debated. She's a very strong character in the play, and certainly behind much of the action of the plot (Findlay, 198). As her remark (1.5.) makes clear "...Come, you spirits.//That tend on mortal thoughts. Unsex Me..." she's torn, psychologically at least, between her instincts toward tenderness, sympathy, motherhood, womanhood and fragility, associated with femininity, in favor of determination, ruthlessness, and a greed for power (Findlay, 463). This conflict colors the entire drama, and sheds light on gender-based preconceptions from Shakespearean England to the present. It's interesting to note that she wants to be unsexed most obviously to get away with her feminine parts and because she doesn't want to have such feelings as sympathy, compassion and regret which are associated with femininity. She wants to be masculine, and this is certainly Shakespeare's dexterity to show, through lady Macbeth, the very frailties and cruelties of the patriarchal system. However, her breakdown, and the restoration of the natural gender role suggests that her being a subject in that society, a speaking subject from a Lacanian perspective, and a hailed subject from an Althusserian one, cannot be changed.

Cordelia and Her Sisters: Cordelia is one of King Lear's three daughters. Unlike her two sisters, she refuses to flatter Lear, and is therefore cast out of his kingdom without any money or even dowry. Cordelia's honest and genuine feelings become clear when she refuses to flatter her father in public, but forgives her father as soon as he realizes what he has done. Regan and Goneril, on the other hand, flatter their father as requested, but they throw Lear out as soon as they get hold of his money (Findlay, 83-84). They live in a society where "values of the patriarchy show that obedient daughters are far better than unruly ones" (Mann, 264), and that is why Cordelia is banished from the real.

Different interpretations of Cordelia have been put forward that characterize her as a saint, Christ figure, etc. According to the Christian Interpretation of the work, Cordelia's character seems to embody all those qualities we associate with a saint or Christ figure, namely: "Mercy, Charity, Sincerity and Honesty." Her innocent death also fuels this interpretation (Berry, 147). Nevertheless, there is the feminist interpretation that labels Cordelia as a non-autonomous character who turns her back on all the ideals she propagates at the beginning of the play. Cordelia rejects her father's demand to flatter him in public, and "reserves her love and

affection for her future husband.” However, as the story progresses and draws nearer to end, her independence is dissolved and she bestows her love on her father. The fact that they’re both imprisoned is also taken by feminists to mean that Lear can now claim dominance over her love (Dollimore, 104). As Lear says, he is looking forward to “sing[ing] alone like birds “I‘the ‘cage” (5.3). This can be interpreted from the Lacanian-Althusserian viewpoint as well. As a daughter, Cordelia has a role defined for her as she enters her society, and by becoming a subject in that society, she has no choice but to accept whatever qualities her surroundings require her to perform, e.g. abiding by the “Law of the Father.”

Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, in *King Lear* are Lear’s daughters. Their father decides to step down from his throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Therefore, he arranges a public gathering, and tells his daughters to praise him. Goneril and Regan are aware of their father’s expectations, and they tell him exactly what he wants to hear. When it is time for Cordelia, although she loves her father so much, she refuses to acknowledge her love and utters the following words: “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth, I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” (1.1.100-103). Even Lear himself is aware of Cordelia’s love, but because he is embarrassed in front of his court, he decides to banish Cordelia from his kingdom.

Goneril and Regan’s flattery can be interpreted as the public acceptance of the Law of the Father. Ideology has interpellated them to respond to the patriarchy in a way which is favorable to the dominant male. And in this way, they can be said to be the epitome of the age, though they also show shrewdness in their later treatment of their father.

Cordelia, unlike her sisters, loves her father even after she is banished. Cordelia expresses deep concern when she hears of the treatment her father has endured from her sisters, “O dear father... / My mourning and importuned tears hath pitied / No blown ambition doth our arms incite, / But dear love, and our aged father’s right” (4.5.26, 29-31). Cordelia decides to help her father, and this, too, can be interpreted as the futility of rebellion against the patriarchal society and the inevitable nature of the Law of the Father in the Elizabethan era. Cordelia’s maternal love for her father, motherly in the sense that she is loyal and unselfish and she loves unconditionally, causes the resolution of their problems, and their unity at the end.

CONCLUSION

As is clear from the preceding arguments in this paper, by the examination of inter- and intra-subject dialectics of subject formation, as well as keeping in mind the fact that women of Shakespeare’s tragedies are “always-already subjects” in their patriarchal society, subject in the sense of being culturally conditioned, we have come to see that Shakespeare’s depiction of them was in fact neither completely for the feminists fervor, nor completely against it, that is to say that Shakespeare’s objectivity in this representation is very much like Spenser’s “poetics of choice” in which the reader, or viewer, is presented with the facts and then he’s led to the conclusion, made entirely by him. Shakespeare’s women clearly reflect the very ideology of their age in their subjectivity, hence the title of the present study, “Ideological Puppets,” with Shakespeare being the puppeteer as an agent of the dominant ideology. They, in their symbolic stages, have succumbed, quite helplessly, to the Rule of the Patriarch and then, as mentioned earlier, they were interpellated or hailed, to use Althusser’s favorite term, by the society to be as such.

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