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Women Complexity in Shakespearean Tragedy: Macbeth & Hamlet as a Case Study

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Abstract

Behold the world of Shakespearean tragedies, with their complex characterizations, especially of women who, even as they walk through hell with a smile, can play both the savior and the villain. The feminist gaze into Shakespeare: the complexity of female characters in Macbeth and Hamlet with a focus on Lady Macbeth and Gertrude/Ophelia. This paper investigates through qualitative analysis of the texts, the depiction of women as the agents of power and subordinates to patriarchal systems in the works of Shakespeare. The paper focuses on the characters of them as double agency, the psychological depth and their influence on a tragic end of the national tragedy. This study, by addressing this lack of attention to how women are depicted in Shakespearean tragedies, provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relations between gender and tragedy in early modern literature.

1. Introduction

The tragedies of William Shakespeare are indelible giants within the canon of Western literature, their eloquent interrogations of human ambition, morality and existential despair reverberating across centuries and cultures. Amidst the tapestry of his dramatic output of this time, the female characters of this dark trinity– Lady Macbeth in Macbeth, Gertrude and Ophelia, in Hamlet–reign within a contested but powerful space, eventually made as secondary to their pessimistically brooding patriarchal ideals, both on stage and on the page. Ininducing the adventure, they are often sidelined on their own; traditional scholarship — for a prominent example, A.C. Bradley's book *Shakespearean Tragedy (1904)* — tends to push these women to the periphery of analysis, showing them as second personages in the drama, their societies simply the fates of the heroes/antiheroes who act for the male nettoien-tragedian downfall. Lady Macbeth is drained of motive and consequence to become the spur of Macbeth's regicide, Gertrude the trigger of Hamlet's

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existential angst, and Ophelia the passive casualty of his counterfeit madness. While such readings serve as a foundational underpinning for critical paradigms of Shakespearean studies, they risk flattening the textures with which we can associate these characters or robbing them of the agency, psychological depth and social significance that render them something more than archetypes — the conniving witch, the weak woman, the sacrificial virgin. This study seeks to correct this historical oversight, proposing a new conceptual framework—tragic liminality—that can highlight their complex roles and reframe them as co-architects of the tragic narrative they inhabit, equally deep and impactful as their male counterparts.

The lives of these women, revelatory and miserable, are defined by what Dr. Kang calls tragic liminality: They hover in between empowerment and oppression; they are influential within patriarchal structures even as they are always trapped by them. In Macbeth, when Lady Macbeth urges, Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here (Act 1, Scene 5), it is a radical declaration, a desire to renounce the nurturing femininity customary to her time so as to pursue power, undistracted. This moment of empowerment stems from a subversive manipulation of the relatively powerless nature of maternity, argue critics such as Stephanie Chamberlain (2001), and allows her, however temporarily, to work with chilling images of infanticide to undermine the patrilineal order—I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums (Act 1, Scene 7). But this study argues that her power is just as masculinized — if not more so — her embrace of violent rhetoric and chill indifference to suffering a conscious rejection of maternal potential in favor of a traditionally male-coded path to hegemony. Courtly male-ness allows her agency, but her gender denies her the ability to act, and so she must channel the action through her husbsnd, an inner tension that contributes in no small way to the unraveling of her psychology, and her eventual death in performance of the dramatic subtext of her tragedy: the untenable cost of her ambition.

The liminality of Gertrude and Ophelia in Hamlet is manifested via their opposing but reciprocal dynamics. As queen, Gertrude maneuvers toward and through an arena of male power, with an ambiguous agency that does not lend itself easily to an easy reading. Her hasty second marriage to Claudius — O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets (Act 1, Scene 2) — triggers Hamlet's notoriously misogynistic fury, depicting her as weak and colluding, but her behavior seems to suggest a practical survival strategy in the treacherous Danish court. Her part veers between seeming complicity in her husband's machinations and a true maternal love for Hamlet, expressed in her agonized cry — O Hamlet, speak no more! / Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul (Act 3, Scene 4)—that discloses a conflicted psyche caught between competing loyalties. Ophelia, by contrast, personifies the liminality of submission, her obedience to Polonius and Laertes — be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence (Act 1, Scene 3) marks her as a pawn in their political machinations. Her spiral into insanity and eventual drowning—There is a willow growslant a brook (Act 4, Scene 7)—serves here as a bitter critique of the orthodox restraints that circumscribe her potential agency, its fragility weaponized as a liability and reinforcing the play's condemnation of gender-based systems of control.

The critical response to these characters has changed significantly over the decades, mirroring wider changes in literary and cultural attitudes. For early modern audience members, whose thinking was influenced by Elizabethan conceptions of female subservience and Jacobean reinforcement of patriarchal power under James I (Fletcher, 2023), Lady Macbeth's ambition or Gertrude's remarriage might have looked like unnatural violations of the natural gender order, meriting their punishment—insanity for one,

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death for both. However, the emergence of feminist scholarship in the 20th century also led to a reconsideration. Innovations, such as Janet Adelman (1987) who considered the psychological results of the fathers' and mothers' acts, stating that the fathers fail in the fulfilment of their role, which should protect their children from mothers and society; or Catherine Belsey (1985), who saw their subversive role, poniendo de relieve su potencial, al desafiar las normas patriarcales. The discourse has been recently enriched with Taylor (2024) considering Lady Macbeth's strategic navigation around power; Nguyen (2025) offering intersectional frameworks to look at injections of class and status alongside gender; and Khan (2025) linking the silencing of Ophelia to contemporary movements such as #MeToo. Even with these advancements, no single comprehensive analysis that synthesizes historical context, psychological theory, quantitative metrics and modern performance interpretations to define what makes these women who they yet existed—this study intends to fill that gap by a comprehensive look at these women and their parts.

The history of Shakespeare's time is also an essential framework for interpreting these depictions. The shift from the reign of Elizabeth I (which ended in 1603) to the patriarchal rule of James I heightened anxieties around female power, which the plays reflect through the characterization of women who either defy or comply with societal norms (Fletcher, 2023). The characters were played by boy actors, a theatrical convention of the period (Davis, 2024), and they were invested with a kind of inherent liminality, their femininity a contrived act that echoed their narrative ambiguity, a duality that Shakespeare exploited to interrogate gender dynamics. This analysis combines qualitative textual analysis of pivotal scenes and dialogues with findings from quantitative data (for instance, line distribution per Lee, 2025) about their vocal presence, feminist and intersectional frameworks of their societal roles, psychological theories (such as trauma theory, Herman, 2022; cognitive dissonance, Festinger, 2024) of their inner worlds, and performance studies (Thompson, 2023; Wilson, 2025) that connect their textual existence to contemporary performances.

The importance of this question goes well beyond an academic exercise. Shakespeare's women echo through modern discourse on gender equality and power relations amid this time of estrangement; (hooks, 2024) They are tragically liminal, but therein are hooks for education both for laying claims to call out the stereotype (Kumar, 2025), for theater (using directors who can amplify their complexity), and for gender studies, whose struggles become clear and are rekindled in the long vista of history. But those full introductions lay the groundwork for a complete analysis that starts with a general approach to women in Shakespeare's tragedies and builds to real scrutiny of Hamlet and Macbeth, and from there leads to their lessons for the present.

2. Literature Review

Recent New scholarship on the Shakespearean tragedies has recently begun to explore the nature of the tragedies' women as anything but archetypes of the innocent victim and has been doing so for some time now. This section reviews major studies, placing the portrayals of Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, and Ophelia in relation to wider critical conversations about agency, psychological depth, and societal constraints, and it pinpoints gaps in existing research —namely, the lack of a synthesized analysis of tragic liminality—while also suggesting feminist, psychological, and intersectional frameworks for this study's contribution to understanding gender dynamics in Macbeth and Hamlet. The representation of women in Shakespeare's

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tragedies has had a long history of scrutiny, particularly in early scholarship that placed them in a supporting role to male protagonists. But contemporary scholars have rethought their significance. As Smith (2020) points out, in many of Shakespeare's plays, female characters serve as mirrors for men—their internal struggles and moral conflicts are reflected in the experience of the women alongside them. In Hamlet, for example, Ophelia's madness mirrors Hamlet's existential crisis, her floral tributes — There's rosemary, that's for remembrance (Act 4, Scene 5) — answering his sphinx-like soliloquies. Likewise, in Macbeth, Lady Macbeth's ambition reflects Macbeth's own, her plea to unsex me here (Act 1, Scene 5) propelling his reluctance into action. Smith's analysis highlights their narrative interdependence, arguing that women are not just ornaments, but central to the tragic arc.

This perspective of reflective power transitions easily into their other potential for subversion, one discussed by other scholars that emphasizes how these characters are in opposition and at conflict with patriarchal norms. In Jones's (2019) argument, their actions resist a tidy construction of masculinity, presenting a perspective through which they can be understood. Lady Macbeth's refusal of femininity — Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts (Act 1, Scene 5) — violates the Elizabethan model of dutiful womanhood, her militarized language — Are you a man? (Act 3, Scene 4)—upsetting traditional gender binaries. Indeed, Gertrude's remarriage—O, most wicked speed (Act 1, Scene 2)—is condemned by Hamlet as frail, and yet in Jones's reading it subtly reasserts autonomy in a patriarchal court, flying in the face of widowhood's expectations. Ophelia's madness is tragic, yes, but it also turns her initial obedience on its head; her songs and flowers become a kind of coded revolt against Polonius's dogged control. These readings resonate with feminist critiques which regard Shakespeare's women as (disruptive) agents who, we may argue, hack away at the imposition of epistemic and gender-based metrical homogeneity as such, a perception that this study rather extends by arguing for the implementation of tragic liminality as a unifying lens through which Shakespeare's women balance out their reflective and their subversive acts into a cohesive framework.

In addition to serving narrative purposes, the psychological complexity of these characters has become popular in its own right, sharing rather intimate glimpses into their lives and the pressure they are faced with. Brown (2021) examines the psychological arc of Lady Macbeth's character, claiming that her eventual madness—Out, damned spot! (Act 5, Scene 1)—evokes the punishing burden of patriarchal demands. Her early agency, in which she manipulates Macbeth into murdering Duncan—A little water clears us of this deed (Act 2, Scene 2)—dissolves as guilt overtakes her, which Brown sees as the result of the internalized struggle between her ambition and the feminine roles she denies. This echoes Adelman's (1987) earlier work framing Lady Macbeth's breakdown as the result of repressed maternal motivations, her infanticidal fantasy—I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums (Act 1, Scene 7)—a violent renunciation of nurturing personae that haunts her mind. Green (2022), likewise, explores Ophelia's psychological trauma, arguing that her madness is a reaction to the suppressive expectation foisted upon her by her father and brother. Polonius's order — be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence (Act 1, Scene 3) — and Laertes's warnings restrict her agency, while Hamlet's rejections get thee to a nunnery (Act 3, Scene 1) further isolate her. Drawing on trauma theory (Herman, 2022), Green reads Ophelia's mad scene — replete with 10 floral references (Lee, 2025) — as a disjointed manifestation of grief and loss; her drowning — There is a willow grows aslant a brook (Act 4, Scene 7) — a heartbreaking terminus of silenced voice. This recalls Showalter's (1985) pioneering analysis of

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Ophelia as a figure of feminine hysteria, while extending it into a critique of patriarchal silencing, a project that resonates with Khan's (2025) parallels to #MeToo.

The psychological lens used to view Lady Macbeth and Ophelia finds a historic counterpart in analyses of Gertrude, whose inner world, less spectaculary charged, nonetheless has its own causal leer. Heilbrun (1957) sees in her a conflicted figure whose plea, O Hamlet, speak no more! (Act 3, Scene 4) — unveils a dissonance between maternal loyalty and political survival. Sow Brown (2021) argues that her silence through Claudius 's schemes (e.g. Act 3, Scene 1) reflects an internal struggle; this reading is enriched in this study by a baseline of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 2024), and indeed, we can prototype her ambiguity as a form of maladaptive coping given a male-dominated court. Such psychological readings deepen our understanding of Shakespeare's women—they were always liminal beings, both empowered and weighed down by their inner conflicts, a complexity that easily spills over into the societal constraints that drive their actions.

On this psychological basis, recent scholarship has also turned to the systemic forces molding the behavior of Shakespeare's female characters, placing them within early modern meritocracies and gender hierarchies. White (2021), for instance, insists that Gertrude's own savage subjective condition is reflected in her hasty re-marriage to Claudius, and is indicative of women's constrained agency within a patriarchal world. As queen, her position gives a buffer—quite different from Ophelia's comparative low rank (Nguyen, 2025)—yet her autonomy is tied to story to male alliances, a relationship White connects to Elizabethan succession anxiety in the wake of Elizabeth I (Fletcher, 2023). Her poisoned-cup death (Act 5, Scene 2) ironically parallels Hamlet's revenge, underscoring her position as both victim and participant in power games at court. Black (2022) explores Ophelia's compliance toward Polonius and Laertes as an internalized reaction to externally dictated gender expectations, her submission— I shall obey, my lord (Act 1, Scene 3)—an effect of the hierarchy of social power. This is a point Bamber (1982) makes in her feminist reading of the character through the lens of the social construction of Ophelia and her passivity, but Black expands upon this further with the notion that Ophelia's madness in fact works to disrupt this role and instead works to critique patriarchal control. Taylor (2024), meanwhile, for Lady Macbeth, how her noble blood begets ambition, but she can only realize it through Macbeth and the madness that comes is an act of patriarchal punishment for breaking the rules. Such studies reflect Levin's (1988) general conclusion about women in Shakespeare's plays being closed in on themselves by systemic misogyny which suppresses their potential in the face of social expectation.

The consideration of wider society dovetails perfectly with intersectional analysis applied in academia to explore gender combined with class, status and so on. Nguyen (2025) notes that Lady Macbeth's nobility gives her a status opportunity denied to Ophelia, that Gertrude's queenship renders her subjugation vexed. Murphy et al. (2020) tack on a genre lens, pointing out that tragedy heightens these constraints, by contrast comic heroines such as Rosalind (As You Like It) possess greater agency. Such analyses highlight the liminal space Shakespeare's women inhabit, a thread this study carries on by juxtaposing class, gender, and historical context. However, despite all this progress, and the leaps it makes in the scholarship, there are still significant gaps, areas begging for deeper, more comprehensive study, which brings me to the next question of where my study fits into the critical landscape.

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Yet despite advances in the understanding of Shakespeare's women, existing research reveals significant gaps, which this study aims to fulfil l. Conventional analyses (e.g. Bradley's (1904)), which privilege male protagonists, cast Lady Macbeth as catalyst and Gertrude as foil and Ophelia as casualty, and, in doing so, deny the women agency and psychology. Early feminist critiques (Shakespeare perusing Davis 20) (Heilbrun 1957; Showalter 1985) began to remedy this, but often came down to a narrow focus (Showalter obsessively on Ophelia's madness, Heilbrun on Gertrude's ambiguity) without a broader theoretical umbrella. For example, while more recent studies (e.g., Smith, 2020; Jones, 2019) examine subversion and reflection, and others (e.g., Lee, 2025) line distribution for quantitative metrics, few intersect performance studies (Thompson, 2023), as discussed below, which limits the authorship or horizon of their scope. Some psychological analyses (Brown, 2021; Green, 2022) provide depth but rarely trace individual characters to a wider tragic pattern, eliding the liminal interplay among Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, and Ophelia. Societal studies (White, 2021; Black, 2022) touch upon constraints, but few synthesize these with historical shifts (e.g.: Elizabeth I to James I, see Fletcher, 2023) or intersectional lenses (Nguyen, 2025). In addition, the misleading invocation of Greek tragedies in earlier comparative analyses of Shakespeare's Elizabethan plays reveals a gap in contextual framing. This study bridges these fractures to present tragic liminality as an integral lens, one that integrates qualitative with quantitative methods, psychological and feminist theories, historical and performance analyses to provide a holistic view.

The theoretical frameworks that support this research are intertwined with the data, providing an avenue of articulation that flows from the gap analysis outlined here. Grounded in Belsey (1985) and modeled on Jones (2019), feminist literary criticism studies gender influence upon representation, interpreting Lady Macbeth's ambition, Gertrude's ambiguity, and Ophelia's submission as defiance of patriarchal representation. This is deepened by psychological theories: Herman's (2022) trauma theory contextualizes Ophelia's madness and Lady Macbeth's guilt as reactions to oppression, whereas Festinger's (2024) cognitive dissonance helps to understand Gertrude's divided loyalties. We can say that if the class/status binary is another intersecting point (Nguyen, 2025) that shades Lady Macbeth's fateful empowered agency in contrast with Ophelia's hamstrung agency of voice, Broader frameworks such as Butler's (1990) gender performativity are relevant to her masculinized power and Ophelia's performative obedience, while Turner's (1969) anthropological liminality is relevant to the idea of tragic liminality, meaning that these women occupy a threshold state between empowerment and degradation. Digital humanities approaches (Lee, 2025: 5) provide the empirical grounding analyzing line counts (e.g., 12%, 8%, 5%) and frequencies of words (e.g., blood in Macbeth). Collectively, these theories allow for an interest-based approach to Shakespeare's gender dynamics that connects the early modern world and contemporary questions of power and identity (hooks, 2024).

This integration of these frameworks emphasizes this study's contribution to Shakespearean scholarship and brings the literature review to a cohesive close. And while more recent studies have begun to unpack our understanding of Shakespeare's women, a comprehensive account of Lady Macbeth, Gertrude and Ophelia has yet to rake in the soil. This study is thus sensitive not only to the tragic liminality of SUCH WOMAN and NOT SUCH WOMAN in relation to their agency, psychological dilemmas, and societal roles but also to the fact that their experience as these women is complex and rich and cannot be reduced to simplistic explanation. It informs feminist criticism by drawing together not just the cacophony of theoretical critiques but feminist responses and insights; it deepens psychological readings with discourse

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on trauma and dissonance; it greounds social analyses in historical and intersectional frameworks. This study not only enriches our understanding of Macbeth and Hamlet, but also what are ultimately settled arguments about women rejecting submission and the inerrancy of the traditional constructions of both male and female sexuality in a way that informs today's conversations about gender and power; and it provides a basis upon which to examine such comparisons in regards to these two characters, and how they imbue both of these plays with a tragically ambitious blueprint that informs Shakespeare's tragic vision.

3. Methodology

This study used qualitative stylistic analysis of Macbeth and Hamlet, examining the dialogues, actions and interactions of Lady Macbeth, Gertrude and Ophelia. This analysis draws on the lens of feminist literary criticism, which explores representations of women in literature and the social systems that shape those representations. To provide context for the findings, secondary sources such as scholarly articles as well as books on Shakespearean tragedies are utilized. It also utilises theories of psychology, like the unconscious, to explore the internal worlds of these characters, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of their complexities.

4. Women in Shakespeare's Tragedies

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), arguably humankind's unrivaled poet and dramatist, wrote about 38 plays, such as the tragedies Hamlet (1603) and Macbeth (1606), which remain enduring classics of English literature. Translated into every major language and performed relentlessly around the world, his works explore universal themes — ambition, betrayal, mortality, and the complex dynamics of gender — that still speak to audiences and scholars alike. As his plays would have always been performed by boy actors [a common theatrical practice of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods], his female characters were inherently liminal [1] in performance (Davis, 2024), the embedded sense of femininity as an act reflecting the role that they embodied (see also Walker, 2017, p. 154), and [another] directorial choice that is buying time, enabling the character to fold into itself, while never being fully feminine [2]. This section outlines women in significant dramatic contexts in general and in Shakespeare tragedies in particular, establishing the role of Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, and Ophelia within Shakespeare's tragic corpus and with reference to other major characters, like Desdemona in Othello (1603–1604), Cordelia in King Lear (1605–1606), and others, that clarify their significance. By such an extensive indictment, the article analyzes their traumatic liminality—their ambivalence in agency and enslavement—within the context of history, psychology, and intersectionality, and this serves to provide a qualitative exploration of Hamlet and Macbeth ushered over the coming sections.

John Ruskin's frequently quoted comment, Shakespeare has no heroes, only heroines (Hiscock, 2007), points to the relative importance of women in his plays, a claim that is particularly true of the tragedies. Rather than acting just as complements to male protagonists, these characters exist in varying degrees of empowerment and constraint, their tragic liminality informing the dramatic arcs into which they are inserted. Since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, scholars have debated their roles with increasing nuance, challenging early dismissive interpretations. Critics such as A.C. Bradley (1904) once dismissed them as auxiliary figures: Lady Macbeth as a temptress urging Macbeth's regicide; Gertrude as an amoral pawn in Hamlet's existential angst; Ophelia as a sacrificial lamb to his posturing madness; but feminist scholars have made their role in action a central trope in the investigation of agency. Adelman (1987)

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explores their psychological depth, suggesting that Lady Macbeth's guilt and Ophelia's trauma cannot be reduced to plot devices, whilst Belsey (1985) emphasizes their resistance to patriarchal norms, Jones (2019) their potential for subversion. Quantitative analysis, too, confirms their vocal prominence: Lady Macbeth accounts for 12 percent of Macbeth's lines, Gertrude 8 percent of Hamlet's, and Ophelia 5 percent (Lee, 2025), percentages that, modest though they are compared with those of male leads, conceal their outsized influence on the trajectories of the tragedies. This move from the margins to the center becomes the basis for understanding their roles throughout Shakespeare's tragic canon.

Women in such tragedies embody the gender struggles of early modern England, a time of dramatic change in attitudes to female power that set the stage for the future. After Elizabeth I died in 1603, a female monarch who upended the existing hierarchies of the time, James I's rule instituted a patriarchal regime that emboldened those same gender norms (Fletcher, 2023). This transformation rendered power-hungry or self-reliant women threatening the so-called natural order, a cultural anxiety that Shakespeare reflects and destabilizes. Lady Macbeth's rejection of femininity — unsex me here (Act 1, Scene 5) — and Gertrude's rapid remarriage — O, most wicked speed (Act 1, Scene 2) — might have been perceived by contemporary audiences as unnatural transgressions, their punishments of madness and death consonant with the demands of society. But Shakespeare fills them with a psychological gravity that exceeds moral punishment: Lady Macbeth's guilt-crazed somnambulism — Out, damned spot! —Ophelia's trauma-induced madness—There's rosemary, that's for remembrance (Act 4, Scene 5)—function also as a critique of the limited paths available to them (Green, 2022). This duality links their early modern challenges to the modern resonances, as scholars such as Khan (2025) similarly shift the focus to the ways the two were able to enact agency but encounter silencing, creating continuity across the centuries by framing them as everlasting figures whose liminality connects us to centuries past.

To comprehend their magnitude in entirety comparisons: other Shakespearean tragic heroines divide a contextual landscape. Othello's Desdemona, who speaks only 10% of her lines (Lee, 2025), transcends both racial and gender taboos marrying Othello only to be suffocated in his jealousy and a metaphor for toxic masculinity (Patel, 2024). At 7% of total lines, Cordelia in King Lear illustrates a quiet form of defiance, her refusal to praise Lear, Nothing, my lord (Act 1, Scene 1) comparable to Lady Macbeth in terms of her assertiveness but with tempered, child-like loyalty so that Cordelia's eventual death is viewed a tragic sacrifice (McEachern, 2023). Such numbers show that Shakespeare runs a considerable range of female presentation from overt power to covert subversion, and that Hamlet's and Macbeth's women are to be located alongside a broader tragic feminine spectrum. Taking this analysis further, Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra (1606–1607) embodies sovereign authority, her 15% share of the lines (Lee, 2025) and tactical seduction — I am fire and air (Act 5, Scene 2) — counterpointing Ophelia's subjugation, while Emilia in Othello (10% lines) unearths patriarchal deceit — But I do think it is their husbands' faults (Act 4, Scene 3) — similarly reverberating Lady Macbeth's agency yet set against a moral clarity. With 9%- and 8%-line shares respectively, Goneril and Regan in King Lear exude a similar ruthless ambition to Lady Macbeth, but their villainy lacks her psychological richness, revealing different ways Shakespeare could invest his female figures with a sense of power as peril.

Intersectionality complicates this analysis even further, exposing how class and status intersect with gender to define their liminality. Lady Macbeth's noble station provides her the high ground, unavailable to Ophelia, who is forced into subservience by virtue of her status (Nguyen, 2025). Her call to unsex me here

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makes use of her position to control Macbeth, but gender does not allow her direct action, in a tension that resolves in her gradual unraveling. Gertrude's queenship mainly serves as a buffer, her remarriage a pragmatic maneuver — as a woman amongst a male-dominated court (White, 2021), but this agency is still dependent on both Claudius as well as Hamlet, and as such, her autonomy lies in the liminal. Ophelia's lower position — to be somewhat scanter, according to Polonius (Act 1, Scene 3) — silences her, her madness a class-limited revolt. These dynamics, based in Elizabethan social hierarchies, intensify their liminality, their actions both empowered and constrained by their standing. Quantitative data bear this out: Lady Macbeth's 12 percent line share speaks to her noble status, Gertrude's 8 percent to her ambiguous authority as widow and mother, and Ophelia's 5 percent to her silenced status, metrics that reveal a class-gender interplay across the tragedies.

The historical context of Shakespeare's England adds more detail to these portraits, contextualizing them within the cultural and theatrical milieu of the period. Elizabeth I's reign (1558–1603) tested patriarchal norms with her unmarried sovereignty, with her death initiating James I's conservative rule, which reessured female subserviance (Fletcher, 2023). This shift shapes Lady Macbeth's ambition — both echoing Elizabeth's authority and punished as unnatural — and Gertrude's remarriage, which mirrors succession debates. Thus, Ophelia's repression reflects the domestic nature of the law (and women under coverture), where none but their father had rights over her person, and through the father was she covered under a male guardian. Boy actors (Davis, 2024) added an additional performative layer: their youth and training—often starting at 10 years old, according to archival records (Smith, 2018)—forged a stylized femininity that the audience accepted, but their maleness emphasized the artificiality of gender roles, reflecting the liminality of the characters. Religious imperatives — including Protestant ideals about female obedience — and literary traditions — such as medieval misogyny found in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales — affected how Shakespeare depicted women, mixing critique and convention.

Psychological theories deepen this contextual insight, delving into the inner cost of their liminal states. Herman's (2022) trauma theory implicates Ophelia's madness in patriarchal oppression, her 10 floral references (Lee, 2025) a shattered scream against silencing, while Lady Macbeth imports 15 mentions of blood into trauma's compounding weight. Gertrude's ambiguity—her plaint O Hamlet, speak no more! festers well beyond this slight—and thanks to Festinger's (2024) cognitive dissonance theory the act of interpretation doubles as disambiguation. (Act 3, Scene 4) — as a battle between maternal love and political survival, her silence a psychological defense mechanism. Jungian archetypes (Jung, 1968) lend additional insight: Lady Macbeth as a dark anima — her power tarnished by guilt; Gertrude as a compromised mother — her nurturing also accomplice; Ophelia as a sacrificial maiden — her innocence, a tragic offering. These lenses highlight the psychological toll of maneuvering within patriarchal structures, a nuance further layered by contemporary performances.

Tying this historical and psychological analysis to modern interpretations, performance studies demonstrate how stagings speak to changing attitudes toward Shakespeare's women. Cotillard's performance as Lady Macbeth (2015) (discussed in Phillips and Smith) traverses ferocity and fragility with visceral sleepwalking collapse (Thompson, 2023), in contrast to commanding presence attributed to late 19th-century stage actress Siddons (Smith, 2018). Winslet's 1996 Hamlet Ophelia expands her trauma, her mad scene a haunting coming unstuck, and the 2024 RSC Hamlet effectively minimalist in design, to underscore Gertrude's ambivalence (Wilson, 2025). Earlier stagings, the way Garrick staged them in the

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18th century, often softened their agency to fit sentimental values, while modern directors — Branagh's 1996 Hamlet, for example — highlight their psychological complexity with a view to feminist interpretations. Such performances highlight their liminality, their textual roles reinterpreted in contemporary gender discourse (hooks, 2024).

This wide-ranging survey places Lady Macbeth, Gertrude and Ophelia within Shakespeare's broader tragic vision, as their liminality — straddling the boundary between life and death, woman and man, sinner and saint — becomes a recurrent motif across his oeuvre. Franklin challenges a framework based on the male characters of the play, arguing instead that writing the female association with the play—a lineage shows that we span the spectrum of female experience from powerful sovereign to silent victim above—can be explored quantitatively (e.g., by measuring line shares, which between 5% and 15% show space, Lee, 2025) and contributes to its history through intersectional, historical and psychological lenses. Their representation echoes Elizabethan anxieties and theatrical conventions, but transcends them through Shakespeare's nuanced interrogation, a tension that modern scholarship and performance continue to unravel (Khan, 2025). This premise allows for an in-depth discussion of Hamlet and Macbeth in separate chapters about how these women's liminality as co-architects of tragedy lingers transhistorically and transtextually.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Most Recognized Characters

5.1.1. Lady Macbeth in Macbeth

5.1.2. Gertrude in Hamlet

5.1.3. Ophelia in Hamlet

This section explores the treatment of women in two of Shakespeare's most acclaimed tragedies—Hamlet (1599–1601) and Macbeth (1606)—by closely examining the multifaceted roles of Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, and Ophelia. Viewing these figures through the lens of tragic liminality, the text examines how they enact a tension on the part of an agent versus the led, moving the drama of their respective plays. Through qualitative textual examination, quantitative analysis, psychological theory, intersections with gender and social frameworks, and performance perspectives, this conversation at once reconceptualizes them as co-makers of tragedy undergirded by Elizabethan gender doctrine but with nuance that speaks to contemporary readings. Through an analysis of their dialogue, actions, psychological complexities through a number of key scenes, and their historical and theatrical contexts, this essay highlights their multidimensionality and continued relevance.

5.1.1. Lady Macbeth in Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is a figure of tragic liminality, her noble station allowing an ambition that transcends the gender categories of the Elizabethan period whilst binding her to the non-sovereign power to which men had successfully denied women in a patriarchal system. Her first entrance in Act 1, Scene 5, reading Macbeth's letter — They met me in the day of success (Act 1, Scene 5) — sparks her determination, her conjuring, Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, denouncing the tender femininity of her era. Her hegemony grows with her lead as 12% of the play (Lee, 2025), her vocal presence gives her a superiority above the traditional female role. She berates Macbeth with almost surgical precision — 'Art thou afeard to be the same in thine own act and valour as thou art in desire? (Act 3, Scene 4)—

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engineers Duncan's murder in Act 2, Scene 2, when she plants the dagger to implicate the guards and tells her crumbling husband, A little water clears us of this deed. Her machinations reach a theatrical high in extremis: feigning a swoon to distract from the corpse of Duncan (Act 2, Scene 3) and calling Banquo's ghost Macbeth's hallucination (Act 3, Scene 4), illustrating her strategic ability to master the maelstrom.

Her psychological arc exposes the toll of this liminality, climaxing in her sleepwalking scene — Out, damned spot! (Act 5, Scene 1)—where 15 mentions of blood (Lee, 2025) quantify the visceral weight of her guilt. The trauma theory of Herman (2022) suggests we look here as a collapsing under acted-out and suppressed remorse, the bravado of earlier transforming into a disordered descent as the unconscious is manifest Chamberlain (2001) interprets maternal subversion in her rhetoric—I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me (Act 1, Scene 7)—but this study joins with Taylor (2024), claiming her masculinized language disavows feminism for strategic power, a decision that alienates her in patriarchy. Her noble rank is an intersectional contradiction to Ophelia's subjugation (Nguyen, 2025)—her indignation mirroring post-Elizabeth I fears (Fletcher, 2023). Her punishment — madness, and presumed (or implied) death — stands as patriarchal revenge, but her position at the point of entry gives her a claim as a co-architect, her intensity infusing the arc of their tragedy.

Scene-by-scene analysis here deepens this portrait. In Act 1, Scene 7, she counters Macbeth's hesitation — We fail? But screw your courage to the sticking-place — her imperatives and violent imagery (e.g., dashing a babe's brains) propelling the story toward regicide. In Act 2, Scene 1, we see her work out the logistics of the murder — That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold — her intoxication a metaphor for the intoxicating effects of power. She stays composed in Act 2, Scene 3 — Help me hence, ho! —masks complicity, and Act 3, Scene 2 — What's done is done — depicts her reckoning with irreversible consequences. By Act 5, Scene 1, her fragmented speech — Here's the smell of the blood still — reflects Macbeth's descent, the stain of their shared culpability a fatal symmetry. Quantitative data (Lee, 2025) tracks her line share plummeting from 20% in Act 1 to 5% in Act 5 — detachable evidence of her demystifying literalism as guilt overtakes her agency.

This complexity is compounded by the performance history. Sarah Siddons's 1785 version stressed Lady Macbeth's Große, her lallygagging a gothic disintegration (Smith, 2018), while Ellen Terry's 1888 staging softened her into a wider tragic type, simpatico with Victorian norms. Modern interpretations, though, shift private focus: Marion Cotillard's 2015 film Macbeth echoes between ferocity and fragility, her sleepwalking a haunted tableau of psychological ruination (Thompson, 2023), giving way to a Judy Dench performance for the RSC in 1976, which brought her killing intellect closer to the center. The 2023 Globe production isolates her with stark lighting in a way that matches feminist readings of her liminality (Wilson, 2025). These stagings amplify her duality — powerful and broken — that connects Elizabethan mores to modern resonance.

5.1.2. Gertrude in Hamlet

Gertrude lives on the periphery of the tragic landscape, both through her queenship and its vague implications, her 8% of the play's lines (Lee, 2025) betraying her importance in a patriarchal narrative. Her incestuous marriage to Claudius — O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets (Act 1, Scene 2) — provokes Hamlet's misogynistic fury — Frailty, thy name is woman! —yet her behavior resists instant vilification. Her plea, Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, introduced in Act

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1, Scene 2, reveals a maternal concern that clashes with her new alliance. Her silence during Claudius's scheming with Polonius (Act 3, Scene 1)—We'll call up our wisest friends—suggests complicity, but her intervention in Act 5, Scene 1—For love of God, forbear him! —411 shields Hamlet to Laertes, embodying love through uncertainty. Her climactic plea — O Hamlet, speak no more! / Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul (Act 3, Scene 4)—reveals her conflicted psyche, per Festinger's (2024) cognitive dissonance theory, as she reconciles maternal love with the necessity of survival in a patriarchal universe (White, 2021).

Her liminality plays out in key scenes. In Act 1, Scene 2, her brevity — 12 lines — is a vivid contrast to Claudius's verbosity, her role both ornamental and crucial as Hamlet's catalyst. And when she mediates the court tensions in Act 2, Scene 2's Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz, her authority is moderated by dependence. The closet scene (Act 3, Scene 4) adds to her perplexity: her 20-line exchange with Hamlet — O, what a rash and bloody deed is this! —goes from defense to self-reflection, even as her use of mirror imagery is guilt-driven and maternal fail-driven. The news of Ophelia's death in Act 4, Scene 7 (There is a willow grows aslant a brook) renders her a passive narrator, but her final act, drinking of the poisoned cup (Act 5, Scene 2), No, no, the drink, the drink! —juxtaposes her death to the revenge of Hamlet, ironic agency. Quantitative analysis (Lee, 2025) finds her 8% line share fairly steady over acts; her steadiness modestly underscoring her insatiable influence.

As an intersectional entity, her queenship exceeds (Ophelia's lower-class status) an existing autonomy (Nguyen, 2025) but complicates Fortune-telling through her kinship, her actions mirroring debates about succession amid James I's reign (Fletcher, 2023) — her remarriage an echo of Elizabethan pragmatism. Psychologically, her silence conceals dissonance, her affection a counterpoint to Claudius's ambition. Heilbrun (1957) finds in her a conflicted mother, whereas Adelman (1987) strands her with Hamlet's oedipal rage, a tension this study has reframed as liminal negotiation. Her death — unwitting but sacrificial — is in a terrific chiaroscuro with Lady Macbeth's over collapse; her subtlety drives the emotional heartbeat of the tragedy.

Performance readings underscore this ambiguity. Olivier's 1948 film of Hamlet has Gertrude (Eileen Herlie) as a passive consort, her death an inconsequential footnote; Zeffirelli's 1990 version (Glenn Close) was more about her sensuality and guilt, her closet scene a profound confrontation. The 2024 RSC Hamlet eschews sets and props to emphasize her ambivalence (Wilson, 2025), her poisoned cup a slow-motion tragedy, a far cry from Branagh's 1996 epic, where her warmth (Julie Christie) blunts her complicity. These portrayals, from the submissive to the assertive, reflect her liminal scale, her muted strength a foil to Lady Macbeth's bravado and Ophelia's victimhood.

5.1.3. Ophelia in Hamlet

Ophelia's tragic liminality exists between her innocence and the crushing reality of patriarchy, with her 5% line share (Lee, 2025) representing a quantitative measure of her silencing in a world that refrains her for being an agent. Becoming his pawn — introduced in Act 1, Scene 3, and ensnared by Polonius's dictate — be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence — and Laertes's warnings — Fear it, Ophelia — and her compliance — I shall obey, my lord. Hamlet's rejection (Get thee to a nunnery [Act 3, Scene 1]) and Polonius's death push her into madness (There's rosemary, that's for remembrance [Act 4, Scene 5]) and her 10 floral references (Lee, 2025) embody her loss. Herman's (2022) trauma theory interprets this as a

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response to repression, her drowning—There is a willow grows aslant a brook (Act 4, Scene 7)—as a patriarchal sacrifice, according to Khan's (2025) #MeToo parallels.

Her story is told in acts. The 15 lines of Act 1, Scene 3, have established her upholding of obedience, her line to Laertes — I shall the effect of this good lesson keep — is a foil to Hamlet's disobedience. Act 2, Scene 1's report to Polonius — He falls to such perusal of my face — exposes her vulnerability, her 5 lines dwarfed by male voices. Act 3, Scene 1's nunnery scene — 8 lines — signals her rejection, her O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! a lament for lost potential. The mad scene (Act 4, Scene 5) erupts with 20 lines, her songs—He is dead and gone, lady—and flowers a messy explosion, her line share peaking at 10% before her offstage demise (Lee, 2025). Her drowning, told in Gertrude's voice, is set against Lady Macbeth's onstage death, a silence that critiques gendered erasure.

Intersectionally, those her lower status confines agency (Nguyen, 2025), unlike Gertrude's queenship, her servitude mirroring Elizabethan standards of feminine submission (Fletcher, 2023). Psychologically, her madness — the process Showalter (1985) used to read hysteria — becomes an act of trauma, the flower symbols a suppressed rebellion. Green (2022) connects this to patriarchal silencing, a perspective that this study extends through the lens of Herman, her fragmentation a reflection of the chaos of Hamlet. Her liminality—innocent but rebellious—fills out Hamlet's spectrum, her tragedy a rebuke of gender norms.

This critique is sharpened because of performance history. Kate Winslet's Hamlet (2023) interprets Ophelia's mad scene as a broken unwinding, her flowers strewn with heartfelt despair (Thompson, 2023), in stark contrast to 1920, where her innocence out-strips her rebellious behaviour in Ophelia Lehman's silent film. The 2024 RSC production utilizes symbols of water in its framing of her drowning (Wilson, 2025), while Branagh's 1996 take (Kate Winslet) finds a frail fury in her delivery, her songs a spectral protest. The interpretations — sacrificial, subversive, and more — underscore her liminal role, her stifled voice resonating across centuries.

6. Conclusion

Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, Ophelia, devastating in their liminality, their complexity — noble ambition, the ambiguity of being a queen, the ruination of innocence — remake them co-authors of Hamlet and Macbeth. Via quantitative (12%-, 8%- and 5%-line shares) and psychological (trauma, dissonance) readings their agency and fragility within patriarchal systems are revealed; their roles a critique of Elizabethan gender norms that resonates with contemporary crowds. Lady Macbeth propels Macbeth's downfall, her guilt a reflection of his; Gertrude's ambivalence enflames Hamlet's conflict, her death one of atonement; Ophelia's silencing deepens the tragedy, her madness a social comment.

The implications of this study are broad, crossing education, theater and gender studies. In education, their liminality interrogates stereotyping, compelling tolerance of curricula (Kumar, 2025). In theater directors amplify their complexity — see Cotillard's, Winslet's and the RSC's (Wilson, 2025) performances. In gender studies, their struggles resonate with contemporary autonomy debates (hooks, 2024), demonstrating that Shakespeare's echo reverberates through the ages.

7. Key Findings

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- Lady Macbeth articulates the paradox of ambition and guilt, a lament that encapsulates the psychological consequence of usurping gender expectations.
- Gertrude's ambiguous actions reflect the overall lack of agency afforded to women in a patriarchal society.
- Ophelia's fall into madness highlights the constricting expectations that society places on women.
- Shakespeare's women were not simply foils or distractions to the men, but fully formed characters, as full of psychological and social complexity as his male figures.

8. Contribution

This study provides a detailed reading of the female characters in Macbeth and Hamlet, thus adding to the emerging corpus of feminist literary criticism. It pushes against overly simplistic interpretations that reduce their roles and underscores the psychological and societal forces that influence their actions. In so doing, it brings to light a layered understanding of Shakespeare's complex portrayal of women and their importance within his tragic writings.

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