

**Sexuality of Female Royals in Renaissance Plays: Duchess of Malfi,
Gertrude and Cleopatra**

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Gertrude and Cleopatra**

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Abstract

The Renaissance period, even at the height of its progression, saw limited improvement in women's lives regardless of their socio-economic status. While men were engaging themselves in the pursuit of knowledge, inventing new technology, and pushing boundaries, women were confined to the household, their lives suffering under the strict constraint of social, political, and religious customs which were strongly biased in favor of men. It is sadly surprising to see that aristocratic women, who were thought to be politically powerful, were equally controlled by the patriarchal conventions of society. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the postulation that, although wellborn women were recognized nobility, they did not have the same freedom and privileges that men of the same position enjoyed. To examine the restricted lives of aristocratic women, this thesis looks into three aristocratic women, viz-a-viz, the Duchess of Malfi, Gertrude and Cleopatra from the plays, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623), *Hamlet* (1603) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1623). Drawing on feminist perspective offered by Virginia Woolf and Simone De Beauvoir among others, this paper examines the degree of independence actually granted to highborn and governing women, and the extent of their right to pursue their sexual and matrimonial proclivities.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The Renaissance was a very significant period of artistic and cultural change. Although Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance movement, it gradually spread throughout the European continent. This glorious era is known as the "rebirth" because the influence of the art, science, and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome, which had waned in the earlier period, saw revitalization with significant cultural developments in Europe. Such developments included the invention of the printing press, new artistic vision and the study of Humanism and the emergence of Protestantism. The philosophy of Humanism created endless possibilities for the advancement of human civilization. People of this period devoted considerable time to pursuit wisdom and becoming more culturally, artistically, and intellectually progressive.

Beginning and Progression of the Renaissance

The culture of Ancient Greece and Rome had a great impact on the Renaissance years, leading to the inspiration for many great inventions, fine artistic works, and a growing body of knowledge. John Addington Symonds discusses how the Renaissance was influenced by past glorifications of Ancient Greece and Rome. He states that people of the Renaissance had a deep admiration for the former grandeur of these ancient principalities and consequently, they recreated that ancient culture, adopting Greco-Roman art and architecture. Ancient Greeks were known to have been highly civilized. They contributed to the fields of mathematics, science, literature, and politics.

The vast Grecian empire was eventually conquered and absorbed by Rome. The Romans held Greek culture in high regard, and assimilated it into their own culture. As a result, talented Roman citizens produced works of fine art, sculpture, and architecture, inspired by the legacy of the Greek culture (1).

Eventually the Roman Empire fell into decay due to corruption and complacency. This led to the beginning of the so-called Dark Ages. During this epoch, the secular world rarely held any importance to the people, as they were more interested in spiritual matters, and in the Afterlife. Their existence in the physical world held very little value to them, and religion became more important than the acquisition of worldly knowledge. The artwork of the Medieval Age strongly reinforced religious beliefs through their subject matter, but, due to their nature, they would not accomplish great achievements in creativity or invention.

After the Dark Ages ended, the Renaissance began around the year 1350 AD. Hundreds of lost Greek and Latin manuscripts were discovered during this time, leading to a rebirth of nonreligious learning. These texts helped Renaissance artists to create a new vision for the fine arts. In addition, the flowering of Humanism enabled people to acknowledge the endless possibilities of human potential. It paved a new path toward wisdom for the people (1-6) .

Women in the Renaissance

Although the study of Humanism inspired many to realize the potential of human beings to achieve greatness, this belief system excluded consideration of women. The female population was expected to accept the traditional roles of being wives and mothers. Theresa Huntley informs us that women were confined to well-defined gender roles, and were not allowed to

develop any potential towards greatness or to contribute to the general enlightenment, unlike men of this era. She states, “During the Renaissance period, people believed that everyone could achieve greatness. But they meant every man. They were expected to be wives and mothers, were not well educated, and did not engage much in life outside the home...The focus of women’s lives was to marry well, be good wives for their husbands, and produce male heirs...”

(4). From this statement, we may conclude that women were not given equal opportunities, and thus their talents were not given a chance to flourish in Renaissance society. Likewise, Virginia Woolf argues that creative women have been consistently disadvantaged because traditions and social norms have favored men over women. She urges that women struggled with the same gender obstacles in the Renaissance as well. To demonstrate her point, she offers a fictional example from the Renaissance timeline, when Shakespeare flourished. To establish her argument, she depicts the character of Shakespeare’s sister Judith, who was as equally gifted as was Shakespeare but who was not able to use her talents fully due to the limitations placed on opportunities for women in her time. Woolf describes how Judith grew up being deprived of education, while her brother William enjoyed the training available to all males. As she grew older, her family insisted that she get married and limit herself to the domestic sphere. To escape this traditional fate of women, she escaped from her home and moved to London in hopes of becoming as creatively successful as had her brother, but instead, she was exploited in her vulnerable situation and ended up pregnant in that large, cold-hearted city of London. She became frustrated with life as she had experienced it and committed suicide. By giving the example of Shakespeare’s sister, Woolf demonstrates that talented Renaissance women would be mocked and taunted by society if they did not confine themselves within the walls of their homes. There was no opportunity to make use of their talents. If they dared to go against the

social norms, the consequences were uniformly appalling. She further adds, "...it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty... That woman, then, who was born with a gift of poetry in the sixteenth century, was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain..."(56, 58). By these statements, Woolf wanted to make the readers understand that it is very possible for a creative woman to lose her sanity in an oppressive, misogynistic culture. And beyond that, women who challenge and wish to break free from the subservient position could be expected to be regarded as mentally unstable.

Progression of Literature before the Renaissance

Literature went through a developmental progression from the ancient Greco-Roman Age through the Renaissance. In the essay, "World Literature Periods," the progression of Literature is discussed. The oral tradition of literature in common use is the Homeric (or Heroic) period (1200-800 BCE). For example, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were transmitted orally for many years before being committed to text. The Greek period (800-200 BCE) was a dazzling era in the field of literature. Many famous Greek philosophers and playwrights lived during that time, including Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Sophocles, and Euripides. The classical Roman period (200 BCE-455 CE) was as glorious as the previous Greek period. Some prominent Roman poets of the

time were Plautus, Terence, Ovid, Horace, and Virgil. The Roman Empire gradually reached its end as violent social and political upheaval took place. The progress of literature slowed in the Middle Ages during which there were not many significant works in the field of literature apart from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which enjoyed wide popularity. Some notable literary figures were Geoffrey Chaucer, Wakefield Master, and William Langland.

Spirit of Renaissance in the writings of William Shakespeare and John Webster

Literature in the middle Ages was very restricted in scope and authors of the time generally focused on Man's relationship with God and God's divine power. The literature of the Renaissance period was much more expansive. Authors during the era began to portray characters with some complexity and emotional depth. As a result, literature went through significant change during this time of cultural awakening.

William Shakespeare and John Webster both captured the spirit of Renaissance in their writings. Unlike portrayals of simple characters in the pre-Renaissance times, Shakespeare portrayed characters with a complexity that one expects from people in the real world. He was able to breathe life into many distinctive characters that were not only very different from each other, but also very convincing as personalities. Moreover, he brought passionate authenticity and genuine profundity to his plays by portraying people of diverse backgrounds and motivations. Shakespeare invented new words and expressions to empower and enrich the English language at the time. He used vibrant language, emotional realism, and depth of feeling in his plays, and he made his characters well rounded and not one-dimensional. Despite the fact that his plays are hundreds of year's old, individuals today can still relate to his characters, through their strengths, weaknesses, and emotions. An example of this can also be seen in

Hamlet, as the character of Prince Hamlet comes across as immensely complex that no other character in the play is able to fully understand him. Moreover, Shakespeare incorporated his knowledge of Greek and Roman plays in his writings. The uniqueness of Shakespeare's plays added to the cultural development of the Renaissance period and to the general resurrection of European literary writing.

Furthermore, John Webster is one of the most undervalued Renaissance authors who also has been successful to incarnate the spirit of Renaissance in his literary works. Webster's plays incorporate infidelity, murder, treason and political scheme, issues of class partition, the nature of equity, love and desire, the influence of religion in social order, political commitment, family relations, and dishonesty and immorality courts. Webster portrays characters that are complex alike genuine individual as well as illustrating dark psyches of human. At the same time he magnificently sets the play's structure to draw out tension among the audience.

Webster is able to capture the spirit of the Renaissance by creating such a strong-willed woman as the Duchess of Malfi, as she challenges the gender hierarchy of patriarchy. She provokes her sibling's ego by ignoring their reluctance for her second marriage and secretly marrying Antonio. Furthermore, the Duchess comes across as a woman of alluring sexual nature while she persuades Antonio, "Beauteous? / Indeed I thank you: I look young for your sake; / You have ta'en my cares upon you" (1.3.75-78). By depicting robust female character like the Duchess of Malfi, he breaks the pattern of stereotypical portrayal of docile representation of women ("John Webster: A Darker Playwright for Renaissance England" 1).

Renaissance Literature and Gender Roles

Literature during the Renaissance went through a visible progression as people were exposed to broader knowledge, which drew them out of superstitious beliefs. Due to the invention of the printing press, published books became broadly available. People engaged themselves with worldly wisdom and knowledge. William Shakespeare became rightly famous during this era. The master playwright was capable of portraying the universal human conditions in his plays. Apart from Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, John Donne, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, Andrew Marvel, Philip Sidney, and Thomas Kyd were other notable figures of chief of this era. John Milton was another pinnacle of Renaissance English literature. Prior to Milton's time, it was extremely rare for playwrights and authors to discuss the Christian religion with any sense of skepticism or criticism. Inspired by the biblical story of Adam and Eve, Milton portrayed the first woman as the weaker sex as compared to the first man. We can see his emphasis on the subordinate position of Eve when he describes the couple in *Paradise Lost* (iv), “For contemplation of he and valor formed / For softness she and sweet attractive grace/He for God only/ She for God in him” (296-299). Even Eve expresses her own subsidiary state in her articulation, “God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more/ Is woman’s happiest knowledge and her praise” (638-639). People in the Renaissance viewed women as naive, inherently flawed, and morally weak. Their condescending view of women was bolstered by the widely accepted Biblical interpretation that Eve was morally irresolute, having been tempted by the serpent to eat the Forbidden Fruit and having succumbed to that temptation.

The situation of women was represented in many works of Renaissance literature. For example, the reflection of women’s subordination can be seen in the famous Renaissance play

The Taming of the Shrew (circa 1592) written by William Shakespeare. The character of Kate was considered a “shrew” in their society. Towards the end of the play she is seen as having been domesticated by her husband. We see her giving a speech encouraging women to submit themselves to their husbands just as subjects submit to rulers. Kate says,

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,

Thy head, thy sovereign...

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,

Even such woman oweth to her husband (5.2.156-166) .

The stereotypical portrayal of gender-based roles in the patriarchal Renaissance society is reflected in Kate’s speech. Her monologue sends the message that women should submit themselves to the superior male authority and that their devotion to their husbands should be as strong as that of vassals to their rulers. Renaissance society was patriarchal and women were considered to be inferior to their male counterparts. For this reason, men were regarded as the head of the household, and thought to be most suitable for making important family decisions. Author Theresa Huntley speaks about men being superior in almost every sector. She says, “Society in the Renaissance was patriarchal which means that men held all the power. The eldest male was the head of the family and men ran the government. People believed that women could not be in charge because they were inferior to men.” (5). From this quote, we may understand how the gender role system was an important part of marriages. Men were the authority, and every important position in society was appointed by them. Margaret L King describes the arrangement of Renaissance marriages, “The wife who had married, wiling or unwilling, had to

develop a relationship with her husband negotiated between contradictory injunctions. On the one hand, she was expected to be a companion to her husband, but on the other, she was his subordinate and the object of restrictive regulations imposed by him and other male authorities.” (35) .We may deduce from this statement that matrimonial arrangements were consistently in the favor of the man of the union, while the woman was the one on whom restrictions were imposed. The situation of women did not improve substantially in the Renaissance. In fact, there was no significant change in the status of women when compared to that of periods immediately past.

Sex and Sexuality of Renaissance women

Not only were women viewed as subordinates in society, but they were also considered irrational, feeble, and weaker sex both physically and emotionally. Furthermore, they were considered a burden to the family. In those times, marriage was the primary goal of a woman’s life. Women were regularly married off at an early age. Those women who remained unmarried were sent to a convent to become nuns; a woman’s life was controlled by rules and regulations of a largely misogynistic society. It was very important that women remained chaste for their future marriage prospects, as emphasized by Margaret L. King. Her dowry, a material premium which accompanied betrothal, was extremely important for the same reason. She stated, “From birth, then, daughters presented a double burden to their families: the preservation of their chastity and their provision of their dowries.” (45) The conclusion can be drawn that chastity and the dowry were two crucial factors in affecting the fortune of a young Renaissance woman’s life. On the other hand, young Renaissance men were not required to preserve their chastity or provide a

dowry for their future marriage prospects. It makes one realize the great double standard that existed in Renaissance society regarding marriage and sexuality.

As one might expect, the subject of sex was taboo in Renaissance society. Sexual intercourse was only meant for human procreation. The sexuality of women was considered a forbidden topic, and under these circumstances imposed limitations caused great suffering for healthy women. Given this, a woman's sexuality was almost always repressed. Chastity was considered very precious in this male-dominated society, and women, whether virginal or not, were viewed as substandard to men by nature. The double standard of sexuality was highly visible in the general gender discrimination of Renaissance society. The structure of the system gave tacit approval to men to satisfy their sexual desire whenever they felt so inclined, even if they were married. By contrast, the sexuality of women was under strict regulation and women were expected to protect their virginity, which was regarded as a representation of her honor, prior to marriage. Society looked down upon women who were unfortunate enough to be raped, however, in a highly perverse way, the rapist was admired. Simone De Beauvoir discusses how every patriarchal society has held these double-standards regarding virginity. She states:

Patriarchal civilization condemned women to chastity; the right of men to relieve sexual desire is more or less openly recognized, whereas women are confined within marriage: for her the act of flesh, if not sanctified by the code, by the sacrament, is a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness: she is obliged to defend her virtue, her honor; if she "gives in" or if she "falls", she arouses disdain, whereas even the blame inflicted on her vanquisher gives him admiration .(444)

This statement asserts that it was only women who were shamed for losing their virginity because of losing their honor in society. On the other hand, men were admired for their sexual conquests, as they took the virginity, or sexual honor, of some poor female. From these discussions, we may come to the conclusion that women, regardless of their class position, were victims of discrimination in society.

Aristocratic Renaissance Women

Women from an aristocratic background had access to luxury, but had little power due to their institutional dependence on male authority. Joan Kelly addresses this particular aspect of being a Renaissance noblewoman:

Noblewomen, too, were increasingly removed from public concerns—economic, political, and cultural—and although they did not disappear into a private realm of family and domestic concerns as fully as their sisters in the patrician bourgeoisie, their loads of public power made itself fit in new constraints placed upon their personal as well as their social lives. Renaissance ideas on love and manners, more classical than medieval, and almost exclusively a male product, expressed this new subordination of women to the interests of husbands and male-dominated kin groups and served to justify the removal of women from an "unladylike" position of power and erotic independence. All the advances of Renaissance Italy, its pro-capitalist economy, its states, and its humanistic culture, worked to mold the noblewoman into an aesthetic object decorous, chaste, and doubly dependent—on her husband as well as the prince.(197)

Basically, we may conclude that Renaissance gentlewomen were being inveigled by the culture to withdraw from any independent participation in politics, government, and economic

enterprise, and were being coerced into submitting to the will of their husbands. This attitude came from classical times of ancient Rome and Greece rather than from the post-empire Medieval culture. Its influence also apparently extended to any initiative in sexual/romantic matters. As a result, woman of the time was objectified into something decorative and asexual, and existing to service her husband and any male head of state.

Queen Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth is regarded the most famous and accomplished monarch of the Renaissance era. Despite being a female, considered in those times as the stereotypical weaker sex, she was able to rule England with great success. She trashed the gender stereotypes by showing strength and emerging as a powerful monarch. History tells us that there were many English subjects infuriated by and strongly opposed to a young woman taking sole governing authority with the crown. One notable personage against Elizabeth's ascension was the renowned preacher, John Knox, who wrote in 1558, 'It is more than a monster in nature that a woman should reign and bear empire over man'(1). Moreover, a large portion of the English populace was outraged at what it considered an illegitimate claim to power, and believed that she was not entitled to the exaltation that the position of Queen bestowed. In fact, quite a bit of Europe viewed the presumptive queen as the bastard offspring of King Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn, because at the time of their marrying, the Pope had not authorized Henry's divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Despite all the protests and disputation concerning the impending occupation of the English throne, this determined woman persisted to see coronation on November 17, 1558. In a similar vein, Amanda Ruggeri asserts, "When she came to the throne on 17th November 1558, she quickly realized she inherited a poor, ill-equipped country highly vulnerable to attack" (1). Under this circumstances, when her attention was drawn to this

state of affairs, she quickly grasped how great the crisis was and how urgently improvement was needed, and immediately committed to overcoming any challenges and obstacles that might have lain in the path of resolution. Nevertheless, there were religious conflicts between Roman Catholics and Protestants which devolved into revolt. To resolve the disputes between these groups, she invented a resource for mediating disagreements by declaring herself Governor of the Church of England. On top of these issues, there were also constant threats of invasion from France and Spain. Fortunately, she was able to make peace with other foreign countries, strengthening diplomatic relations with them, and making allies for England's defense against the two rival states. If that wasn't enough, her distant cousin, Mary (the Queen of Scotland) turned out to represent a clear threat to Elizabeth's throne and numerous Catholics viewed Mary as the legitimate Queen of England, because she was Catholic herself. For this reason, Queen Elizabeth feared she might somehow lose her throne to this potential usurper. When Mary traveled to England in 1568, she was instantly taken to Carlisle Castle as captive, and later executed. Her regime contributed remarkably to the fields of literature, art, music, writing, and science. This was a period of extended naval control, rising personal success, and religious resilience, as well. Reflecting on Queen Elizabeth I's challenging rulership, Brenda Ralph Lewis opines:

Being a female sovereign, Elizabeth I had to work much harder than a contemporary male monarch and she had to be very strategic in her rulership skills. There were three fundamental ranges in which Elizabeth confronted issues where she was compelled to settle on troublesome choices at an early stage in her rule: marriage, religion and foreign legislative issues. The subject of her marriage became a matter of tension for the court. According to the laws of that time, it was mandatory that she be married. But matrimony

also represented a danger of losing the authority of her rule. There were many a suitor who wanted to make her his wife but she rejected each to remain the so-called “virgin queen”. Elizabeth was totally candid when she confessed, “If I followed the inclination of my nature, it is this, ' beggar woman and single, far rather than queen and married.'”(3)

Nonetheless, there are many speculations about the romantic alliances of Elizabeth I. It is historically acknowledged that Elizabeth enjoyed of the company of many youthful royal males like Thomas Heneage, Christopher Hatton, and Walter Raleigh, and later Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex; every one of whom saw their flirtations as the way into the queen’s favor. However, Robert Dudley was the man she was genuinely fond of. There is conjecture that she honestly loved him and that they developed a relationship of considerable romantic intimacy. Many historians assume that Elizabeth was keen to marry Dudley, but that she could not do so because he was already married. Nevertheless, his marital status did not stop them from carrying on an affair.

On the whole, Queen Elizabeth I was a brilliant monarch who ruled successfully for forty-four years despite great odds levied against her. Notwithstanding being a female sovereign, she did not hesitate to take on challenges, acted both tactically and strategically as leader, and addressed national crises with a boldness usually attributed to a male monarch. Elizabeth upended the contemporary patriarchal structure, and debunked fears about female governance, and she demonstrated that she had unanticipated and remarkable qualities of leadership. The age that carries her name was known as the Golden Age, because England thrived mightily under her rule.

Lady Jane Grey

Another example of aristocratic woman is Lady Jane Grey(1536/1537 – 1554) , who became the Queen of England for a very short period but her reign ended in tragic death .She was a noblewoman who met with tragic consequences for being a member of the British Royal family. She is famously known as ‘Nine days Queen’ because, in the year 1553, she was able to rule the British Kingdom for only nine days. The Lady was the great granddaughter of Henry VII and her father was the Duke of Suffolk. She was a Protestant and very pious. Despite her reluctance to marry the Protestant Duke of Northumberland’s son, Lord Guildford Dudley, she was obligated to do so at the age of only 15/16.This marriage without her consent is yet another example of Royal renaissance women not having the freedom to choose their spouses in line with their own wishes. However, her father-in-law, Lord Northumberland, was frantic to maintain his position of authority, which was about to cede to king Edward' stepsister and beneficiary, the Catholic Mary Tudor. Northumberland influenced the king to pronounce Mary illegitimate. Edward died on July 6, 1553. Four days later, Jane was proclaimed queen. On the contrary, Mary Tudor had widespread popular support and the political circumstances were in her favor. Foreseeing the arising danger to himself, her own father, the Duke, abandoned Jane and proclaimed Mary queen in an attempt to save himself. Protestant Northumberland's supporters melted away and Duke of Suffolk easily persuaded his daughter Jane to relinquish her crown. Subsequently, Mary imprisoned Jane and her husband in the tower of London where they were eventually executed. The story of her tragic life demonstrates how she was used as a pawn for political gain and her young life was sacrificed by powerful political forces (“Lady Jane Grey” 1).

Marguerite de Valois

Furthermore, Marguerite de Valois (1553-1615) can also be considered a victim of endless suffering because of her noble birth. She was a French princess renowned for her beauty. She was the daughter of French King Henry II. Her mother, Queen Catherine de Medici, was cold hearted and ruthlessly ambitious and her three brothers were very cruel and bloodthirsty. Although her good looks were celebrated, she was very unfortunate to be born into this malicious family. When she was only 19 years of age, a marriage was arranged to Henry IV, who later became the king of Navarre. Marguerite's union with Henry was a diplomatic scheme hatched by her mother. Upon hearing the news of Catherine's plan for her, she promptly refused to marry Henry as she was in love with someone else. As a result, she was physically beaten and was forced to the altar by her family. The newly married Marguerite was bereft of any love. Her husband lived apart from her throughout their married life and had illicit relationships with many women. There was no affection or passion between them. Feeling isolated and lonely, she grew fond of French noblemen named Joseph Boniface de La Mole. Unfortunately, her family members came to know about her discreet affair with Boniface and her mother ordered her lover executed. It is historically known that Boniface was horrifically tortured with a boot machine which crushed every bone of his body. Marguerite's brother, King Henry, used to brutally bully her and exert extensive control over her life. He became the king upon the death of his brother, Charles. Henry accused his sister of being a loose woman with degenerate nature. Rumors circulated at the court about this supposed nature of Marguerite's character. The king falsely accused her of having an illegitimate child by one of her lovers. He ordered her to spare the French court of her poisonous presence. Even as she fled from Paris into exile, she was followed and humiliated by a group of rowdy men sent by her brother. As a strategic survival technique,

she chose an army captain as her next lover. She and the officer were subsequently caught by a spy employed by her brother Henry, and in order to teach her sister a lesson, the king had her companion executed by burying him alive in front of her. These horrific consequences show that Marguerite's life was controlled by her family members and she did not have any freedom to fulfill her personal wishes, desires, or need for love. Feeling frustrated and furious, she revolted and seized control over the city of Agen. Following a short period of sustaining her hold over the city, the subjects of Agen rebelled in turn against her, and she fled to the palace at Carlat. In 1586, the troublesome monarch Valois was detained by her sibling Henry III in the mansion of Usson, in Auvergne, where she was held imprisoned for 18 years. Being born a female, she was in a disadvantaged position and her cruel brothers took advantage of her weaker position to torment her whenever it suited them to do so ("The Scandalous Life of Queen of Navarre and France-Margaret De Valois" 1).

These three above examples of aristocratic woman represents the fact that although they belonged from the elite class but their position in the society was distinguished by gender discrimination and they suffered no less than any ordinary woman. All things considered, we may realize that although culturally, artistically, and intellectually the Renaissance reached new heights, the state of women's personal agency basically stagnated. Men were the superior authority and women were viewed as not equal to men. This paper argues that aristocratic women had no freedom to pursue their sexual desires nor to marry according to their own wills. They were prohibited from fulfilling their intimate desires, sexual and otherwise.

This thesis will offer an insight into the lives of aristocratic women and show that despite being in socially powerful positions, they could not transgress borders which were open for men in similar positions, and that they were as much the victims of male oppression as were common

women. In order to do this successfully, this paper will look into the lives of aristocratic women characters portrayed in literature, such as, Duchess of Malfi in *Duchess of Malfi*, Gertrude in *Hamlet* .Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* and represent an analysis of how they challenged the social convention of society and the consequences which ensued as a result of their fearless actions.

Chapter II

The Duchess: A Rebellious Noblewoman of Malfi

The Duchess of Malfi is one of John Webster's outstanding theatrical works. It is a well-known Renaissance play recognized for its unique female character portrayal. Webster depicts the Duchess as a strong, intelligent, and gutsy woman who is conscious of her own sexual needs. She is not only an engaged political figure, but a capable sovereign as well, and, on a personal level, a loving and caring mother. When the play opens, we see the Duchess as a young widow who seems obedient to social conventions which prescribed that she would not remarry; but, as the play progresses, we observe her inner fortitude emerging, when she decides to marry secretly, without the approval of her brothers or the society-at-large. We also observe how the widow liberates herself, to a degree, from domination by the men in her life by secretly getting married to a man below her status. Courageously, she marries without social consent, but as punishment for her actions, she is subjected to imprisonment and torture by her own brothers and ultimately, dies. The demise of the Duchess is a prime example of Renaissance aristocratic women being prohibited by any means from expressing their own desires, sexual or otherwise. They did not have any right to marry according to their own choice and had no freedom to pursue their sexual desires or to espouse in hopes of fulfilling those.

The Inspiration for the Character of the Duchess

It is important to keep in mind that John Webster wrote this play at a time when England was under the autocracy of King James. English citizens were nostalgic for the lost glory of the court of Queen Elizabeth I because she was a majestic and competent figure and during her reign, England had flourished. However, she was a queen in the Renaissance era and, thus, had to overcome many institutional obstacles to ultimately become arguably the strongest ruler in English history. There has been keen speculation that this exact nostalgia contributed as an important factor to Webster's portrayal of the Duchess as vigorous and unquestionably superior to men in her strategic administration of the principality of Malfi. The blog, "The Duchess of Malfi" discourses on this particular aspect of the influence in which the reign of Queen Elizabeth apparently had on the character of the Duchess. It asserts,

The Duchess can be seen as modeled on Queen Elizabeth, as a strong woman who retained her authority as a powerful figure. However, the Duchess' downfall comes when she refuses to be ruled by her brothers when she chooses love over what they term her 'duty' as she tries to reconcile the contrast between being a woman and being a ruler. It is this point which may reveal the reason behind Webster's portrayal of the Duchess. By the time he wrote the play in 1613 people had wearied of King James' ineffectual rule and longed for the days of Queen Elizabeth, a sentiment so widespread that King James himself was aware of it, and admitted that he could not rule as well as she had. This nostalgia for the Queen may have contributed to the reversal of gender roles in Webster's

play... The Duchess is generally decisive and assertive in her dialogue and in her actions.

(1)

The assertion that the character of the Duchess is based on courageous aspects of the persona of Queen Elizabeth I seem quite reasonable and thus Duchess is depicted as so hardy in nature and has a stronger personality alike Elizabeth I.

Speculated Historical Inspiration of *Duchess of Malfi*

There are speculations that two instances of real life historical tragedy of Giovanna d' Aragona and Lady Arbella inspired the character of the Duchess. This information is examined in the article "The Duchess of Malfi: A real life, historical soap opera", wherein the body of writing discusses the tragic life of Giovanna d' Aragona, who was born in the royal house of Aragon in 1478. Being widowed when she was still of childbearing age, she soon falls in love with the house Steward, Antonio, and decides to marry him. She is well aware that her brothers will object violently should they discover her decision to remarry, and especially as her intended spouse is a commoner. This union remains discreet for a significant period of time until it is eventually revealed. Ultimately, her two brothers, Luigi di Aragona (the Cardinal of Aragon) and Marquis of Grease, deduce the truth. This second marriage breaks contemporary social conventions and traditions requiring that a widowed woman remain chaste perpetually, thus endangering her very own life. Her brother, the Cardinal, was a person of great influence, and he manages to convince the Cardinal of Ancona and Signiory of Siena to excommunicate them. Subsequently, in the year 1511, the Duchess and her two young children are imprisoned in Amalfi and never seen again. Commenting on the wide spread recognition of this tragic death of

Amalfi, the article, "In and out of the bird cage : the language of confinement", reports that the real-life tragedy of Giovanna d'Aragona became widely popular and appeared in a collection of tales titled *Palace of Pleasure* by William Painter, from which Webster was reputed to take his inspiration (1-2) .

Another real-life tragedy is the story of Lady Arbella whose subject character closely resembles the Duchess in disposition. Sara Jayne Steen highlights the true story of this notable figure. Lady Arbella Stuart was an English Renaissance noblewoman. She is often referred to as "England's lost queen" because she had been a potential candidate for the English throne after her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I. She was subsequently incarcerated in the Tower of London for committing the crime of marrying someone from a lower class without the permission of the authority ("The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and Duchess of Malfi" 3-4). Her actions violated social regulations and damaged her family's trust in her, and, as a result of being bereft of the support of kin and government, she was captured, tortured and allowed to die in captivity. We see that the tragic histories of Giovanna d'Aragona and Lady Arbella both represent to the reader the restricted life required of Renaissance aristocratic women. These personal stories indicate that, in spite of their high station, all these women lacked the basic right of marriage until it was not approved of by Society's arbiters. In fact, violating resistance to Renaissance conventions usually resulted in the brutal consequences of imprisonment, torture and, in most cases, death. Taking these narratives into account, it can be argued that the character of the fictional Duchess was indeed inspired by these tragic real life stories of Giovanna d'Aragona and Lady Arbella.

Marital and Sexual Autonomy of the Duchess

In a number of instances in the play, we see her brothers threatening the Duchess. They confront her with their views of marriage, emphasizing that they wish her to henceforth be celibate. They complain that her aristocratic blood will be contaminated if she consummates with a man outside her station. In their opinion, those who marry for the second time possess a most lecherous nature. Therefore, they say, “Marry! /They are most luxurious will wed twice”(1.3.10-11) . Despite the threats and prohibitions uttered by her brothers, the Duchess decides to go forward with her plan because, to her, marriage represents freedom, and it grants her the opportunity to proclaim her rights. Author Emily C. Bartels discusses how marriage helps the Duchess to assert her rights. She says, “... the duchess has established her "right"; through marriage and not widowhood that she has acted on her desires” (423). Her abundance of courage helps her to rebel against Renaissance social conventions. She disobeys the wishes of her brothers and gets married surreptitiously and realizes the possible obstacles in her way, but she views these obstacles rather as a ladder to her marital goals. She is determined to take control of her individual life by making decisions of her own will. In the Act 1, scene 3, she expresses this autonomy, “If all my royal kindred/Lay in my way unto this marriage/ I ’d make them my low footsteps”(62-64) . From this statement, we may conclude that she is not let down by the obstacles in her way, but rather experiences them as making her more determined to engage her in matrimonial unity.

Moreover, her marriage to Antonio gives her the right to access her sexuality. She is portrayed as being sexually self-aware who embraces her sexuality, rather than repressing it.

In the context of her sexuality, author Christiana Luckyj acknowledges that the Duchess is a woman of sexual energy (268). The Duchess does not deny her natural sexual desires even though she belongs to the lofty aristocratic ranks. Consequently, we are treated to the scene of her wooing Antonio and plying her influence on the man by contrasting herself poetically with an alabaster statue. We also observe the Duchess comparing her human desires to an alabaster statue within a tomb which is an object incapable of either feelings or sexual desires. She says, “This is flesh and blood, sir/ T’ is not the figure cut in alabaster /Kneels at my husband’s tomb”.(I.I.453-455) .This statement is compelling as the Duchess declares that she is a woman of all sorts of desires and instincts and she cannot be expected to become an alabaster statue with neither feelings nor desires. Furthermore, through her verses, she emphasizes the fact that a widow in fact has the right to remarry. Her metaphoric expression represents independent declaration of not remaining chaste for rest of her life in the honor of her dead husband.

Personal and Political Autonomy of the Duchess

The Duchess is a woman of autonomy and pride and she rebels against the social convention to fulfill her desires. Theodora A. Jankowski contends that this rebellious posture by the Duchess is a reaction to the misogynistic values of the Renaissance culture. She is very brave as she prepares to face the consequences of her choice. In act 3 scene 2 , the Duchess states that she will act according to her wishes as a prince would and she is willing to face the outcome of her decisions. She demonstrates her autonomy in this statement, “Tis is welcome/ For know/ whether I am doom’d to live or die/ I can do both like a prince...” (67-69). Moreover, the Duchess also challenges her brother, asking why she is not allowed to marry in spite of the fact

that she is young and single. In her estimation, it is only natural for her to get married again at her age. She asks, “Why might not I marry? / I have not gone about in this to create/ Any new world or custom...” (3.2 .127-129) .Although the Duchess did not create any new worlds or customs; it was unconventional for a Renaissance aristocratic woman to get married by her own choice. In spite of this, she proceeds to marry beneath her aristocratic rank for reasons of compatibility and equality of character. In doing so, she directly challenges the social restrictions of her time. Marriage based on equality and compatibility of character was neither understood nor accepted at that time. Family played the primary role in choosing a woman’s husband. To get around this lack of personal power, the Duchess decides to wed secretly, violating the social restrictions of Renaissance society. Although she is able to create a new secret world for herself, eventually it is undone by the interference of the enforcers of social Convention.

The Renaissance patriarchy separated women’s sexuality from natural sexual desire of humankind as a whole, hoping to control it from a position of authority. Males were the power which transformed women’s natural sexuality into what amounted to a valuable property. Regarding this situation, a note from the blog “Duchess of Malfi” comments, “...the way patriarchal society seeks to transform women into decorative, precious objects that can be locked away and safely controlled.” (2). With regard to this view of women, there is a reference in act 3 Scene 2, in which the Duchess demands her brother Ferdinand explain to her why she is being treated as a holy relic and her natural desires as a woman are being ignored. She asks. “Why should only I? / Of all the other princes of the world/Becas’d up, like a holy relic? I have youth and little beauty? And a little beauty...”(3. 2.160-163).However, her appeal falls on deaf ears on Ferdinand while declares that she is a young independent political ruler and it is very normal in

her circumstance to marry for the second time. Ferdinand's reply to the Duchess is that he chooses to be the sole authority controlling her because she is his sister.

The brothers of the Duchess demonstrate the chauvinistic attitudes of the patriarchal Renaissance and gives the audience clear reasoning for why they strongly oppose her second marriage. Their rebellious sister essentially attempts to escape society's rule through a certain reclusiveness, but the outside world does not leave her alone, and she ultimately fails in her attempt to live according to her own will. It justifies the observation that, even though she belongs to an aristocratic family, she does not have the freedom to make her own decisions about key events in her life. Her brothers meddle in her life, curse her, and contemplate violent punishment for her. We see Ferdinand saying, "Would I could be one/That I might toss her palace 'bout her ears/Root up her goodly forests" (II.V25-27) He also adds, "We must not now use balsamum, but fire/The smarting cupping-glass, for that 's the mean/ To purge infected blood, such blood as hers". (2.5.32-34).Moreover, Cardinal says, Curs'd creature!/ Unequal nature, to place women's hearts/So far upon the left side!"(2.5. 43-45).These crude verbalizations by her brother's show how horrifically they want to punish their own sister. We observe them being critical and abusive of her, while contemplating all sorts of innovative ways to torture her. Their interference in their sister's personal life is not totally surprising given the nature of Renaissance men, who reputedly controlled their women's freedom and treated them as chattel. Men of this time generally had a misogynistic view when it came to the sexuality of women. Moreover, Renaissance society held the belief that the union of marriage should be chosen exclusively by a daughter's family towards upgrading social status. The norms of matrimony in Renaissance times did not approve of the idea of marriage based on romantic or personal equality considerations. Additionally, their view held that women should not be given

the independence to choose a husband according to their own preferences and that the family should be largely responsible for designating the life partner for a female member, so as to ensure the enhancement of family status and preserve their aristocratic rank.

Although the Duchess is clearly a gutsy, strong-willed woman, her personal power is shown to have definite limits when her Duchy is forcefully taken from her. Henceforth, her brothers and the Pope are able to usurp her political position whereas he does not have the legal authority to do so (3.2). Under these circumstances, the autonomy of the Duchess is cut short by the initiative of a male sibling and she is unable to do anything to secure her Duchy, and she despairs, collapsing in her anguish, as Bosola recounts, "...she seems rather to welcome the end of misery/ Than shuns it"(4.1. 3-4).

As can be seen, Duchess is in a socially disadvantaged position despite of being a woman of nobility. Her action of transgressing the social conventions costs her life and thus, it is a reminder that Renaissance noble women of hierarchy suffered from terrible consequences whenever they broke the traditional social customs.

Chapter III

Brave Queen Gertrude of Denmark: A Loving and Courageous Mother

Hamlet is one of the most popular plays written by William Shakespeare. In spite of having a complex and difficult plot, it is popular among worldwide audiences and readers. Not only has it been performed countless times on stage, but it has also been adopted for television series and films.

The play is about a Danish prince who is anguished when his mother marries his uncle after his father's death. Prince Hamlet wants to take revenge for his father's death by killing his uncle. His mother, queen Gertrude is a major character of the play. She has limited appearances and relatively sparse dialogue in the play, but her character's contribution is very important to the development of the plot. Her actions have great impact on the other characters, as well as on the arc of the drama. She is the mother of Hamlet, widowed wife of the late King Hamlet, and the newly wedded wife to the freshly crowned King Claudius.

Discussing the limited speech assigned to Gertrude, Michael Early states, 'Shakespeare's women are not given nearly the number or variety of speeches as his men' (25). Given this fact, the exact and full nature of Gertrude's character is kept rather mysterious. She is very important in the play, yet the importance of her character has been more or less minimized by various critics. Author Rebecca Smith avers that the character of Gertrude has traditionally been played as a sensual, deceitful woman. (194). For this reason, most adaptations of the play reflect Gertrude as a degenerate woman of loose character and slight moral values. Along the same

lines, writer Richard Levin recalls watching many productions of this play in which her character is evidently directed to crawl all over Claudius in a lustful manner while at times treating Hamlet in similar ways (323). In my estimation, Gertrude is not the degenerate or lascivious woman that she is traditionally portrayed as. She is a woman of passion, intelligence, sensibility and responsibility. Gertrude's role is as significant as that of Hamlet. She contributes to the play's progress and it can be argued that without her, the play *Hamlet* would not have the same value as it has today.

Renaissance Expectations of a Widow

Renaissance expectation from a widow was that women should mourn for two years and they were expected to wear mourning clothes, specifically of black colors. They were also prohibited from socializing for at least twelve months. It is obvious to the reader that, by these Renaissance rules, Gertrude was guilty of not complying with the social expectations of an ideal widow ("Gertrude's Role in Hamlet" 26).

Gertrude certainly breaks contemporary social conventions by remarrying in widowhood. There are indications in *Hamlet* about the expectations of a widow in those times. For example, the Player Queen delivers an exaggerated speech in the dumb show by proclaiming that if she remarries again then she ardently hopes to be cursed and to have no peace. She takes a vow with deep sincerity that the earth may refuse her food and the heavens go dark in her presence. She wishes that a prison of gloom may overtake her hope, trust and turn them into despair because, as a widow, she only deserves sorrow, not joy. For this reason, she states, "Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife/ If, once a widow, ever I be wife!" (3.2 171-172). Although this seems rather melodramatic, we can surmise that the Player Queen's speech was inspired by

Renaissance expectations of devotion from a widow. The dumb show sends a message that the widowed queen should never remarry. Under those circumstances, Hamlet claims that the intention of the play was to trap Claudius, but it seems to focus on the Player Queen's crime of remarriage objecting to the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude. Moreover, Hamlet condemns his mother's choice of a second husband. He asks her the reason for her marriage to his uncle. He also opines that her feelings towards Claudius cannot be acknowledged as love, because lust has played a part in it. It is important to keep in mind that marrying brother in law was considered incest in the view of Christianity. That is why, Gertrude's marriage to her brother in law Claudius is regarded as incestuous which makes Hamlet outraged and thus he states, "O, most wicked speed, to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (1.2,156-157).As a result, The prince veritably preaches to his mother that she should be driven by reason at her age. He further scolds his mother by saying that she should be ashamed of herself. Hamlet says,

O shame, where is thy blush?

Rebellious hell

If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,

To flaming youth let virtue be as wax

And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame

Since frost itself as actively doth burn,

And reason panders will

.....

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,

Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty! (3.4. 75-94)

This particular statement by Hamlet reveals that men are threatened by women's sexuality and the accompanying male belief that sexual desire of women is sinful. Therefore, it is very unfortunate that Gertrude becomes the target of scrutiny by her son. It is very important to keep in mind that Hamlet's statement derives from a male-oriented point of view. In my opinion, his rancor towards Gertrude is an emotional reaction to the perception that Gertrude has failed to live up to his patriarchal expectations. As far as the young man's umbrage is concerned, it apparently derives from his upset over his mother not abstaining from marriage as a gesture to honor his dead father. Prince Hamlet idealizes the relationship that his parents had, as a result, his admiration is shattered when his mother chooses to repudiate his expectations. According to his point of view, she commits a great sin. Hamlet says, "Confess yourself to heaven/ Repent what's past; avoid what is to come" (3.4.151-152). It is noticeable that Hamlet's raging recrimination of Gertrude informs Renaissance misogynistic attitudes towards women.

Criticism by Hamlet and the Ghost

Both Hamlet and the Ghost condemn Gertrude from a credibly sexist perspective, thus, they depict her in an unsympathetic way in their narration. In fact, the Queen is not responsible for her own actions; rather, she is rather being held responsible for the accusations of her son and

the ghost of her deceased husband. Numerous critics have put her under the microscope and excoriated her harshly on the basis of pronouncements by Hamlet and the Ghost. In a similar vein, Emily Graf writes that both Hamlet and the Ghost have chauvinistic reasons to be hostile towards Gertrude and to portray her in an unfavorable light. Gertrude's guilt is based not on her own actions, words, or choices, but on the emotionally charged declarations of her late husband and her melancholic son. (17). As reader or theater-goer, we must surely notice that most criticism of Gertrude is male oriented in perspective. With this in mind, we also recognize that Gertrude is being held responsible by those close to her for infidelity, promiscuity, and supposedly exhibiting lustful tendencies. Both Hamlet and the Ghost represent her as a lustful and incestuous woman. So, it can be concluded that the character of Gertrude is treated unfairly, not only by both Hamlet and the Ghost, but also by most male literary critics.

As stated before, Gertrude has very limited number (and length) of appearances in the play and, as a result, her character is delineated by and large by male characters rather than explicit actions of her character. For this reason, the reader's understanding about Gertrude is bound to be heavily influenced by Hamlet and the Ghost's criticisms. Their narrative reveals that they think Gertrude is responsible for committing a great misdeed against her late husband. Hamlet argues that she has brought dishonor to her family and her dead husband by getting married to Claudius. Similarly, the Ghost accuses her of being a woman of a sensual nature, who lets herself be seduced by lustful Claudius. The statements of Hamlet and the Ghost are examined below to analyze those characters' perspective about Gertrude and the revelations it gives regarding the patriarchal treatment of Renaissance noble women generally:

Hamlet: Must I remember? Why, she

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on. And yet, within a month

(Let me not think on 't; frailty, thy name is woman!),

A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she followed my poor father's body,

Like Niobe, all tears—why she-

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer married with my uncle,

My father's brother -but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules. Within a month,

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears

Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,

She married - O, most wicked speed, to post

With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

It is not, nor it cannot come to good.

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue .(1.2.139-159)

In this soliloquy, Hamlet reflects on the hasty marriage of Gertrude. According to the Prince, his own mother is an adulterous. He recalls the passionate relationship between his parents and we hear him state that Gertrude's desire for his father was insatiable. He also ruminates that his mother was devastated at the news of his father's death and cried endlessly like Niobe¹. But he was subsequently taken aback when his mother marries his uncle only a short period after his father's death. Shocked by this, Hamlet is outraged by the fact that his mother does not mourn any longer for his father and gets married to his uncle so soon after Hamlet the elder's death. Although Claudius is the younger brother of late King Hamlet, in Hamlet's opinion, he does not have the nobility to deserve the Danish throne.

Furthermore, Hamlet's famous soliloquy idolizes the relationship of his parent's to the extent that it represents his expectation that his mother should practice celibacy and remain a widow for the rest of her life to honor his dead father. Richard Levin suggests the term "wanton widow", which means a soon-to-be widowed woman who proclaims eternal devotion to her husband and vows that she will never engage herself in matrimony or in any kind of romantic/sexual attachments, but remarries very shortly after her husband's death. Therefore, Levin alludes to the important fact that Gertrude never makes a vow to practice celibacy as a widow but it is possible that her excessive weeping during her husband's funeral was taken by Hamlet as an over protestation and a non-verbal commitment to remain faithful to him by

¹Niobe is considered to be mythological character of mother's eternal mourning for their children. She has excessive pride for her fourteen children. She cried endlessly when her fourteen children were murdered. It is to be said that God Zeus turned her into stone but still her tears flowed from the rock. (Mythology in Hamlet 1).

maintaining her chastity (25). Reflecting on Levin's statement, this paper proposes that it is entirely Hamlet's fault that he mistakes her grief for an oath to remain chaste for the rest of her life. If we credit this as probable, then it is also important to note that Hamlet's soliloquy reveals a subservient view of female sexuality in general and a specific expectation that his mother will remain chaste and single for the remainder of her life. Having said this, one can believe that Hamlet's anger towards his mother would be more understandable if we could acknowledge the fact that, by marrying again, she accesses a new realm of power, and that the union places her in a superior position to males of the court, including Hamlet himself. Not only Hamlet, but also the Ghost criticizes Queen Gertrude for her sexuality:

Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor

To those of mine.

But virtue, as it never will be moved,

Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,

So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,

Will sate itself in a celestial bed

And prey on garbage.(I.V. 139-159)

In the above monologue, the Ghost tells Hamlet that his uncle is incestuous and has seduced his mother. According to him, his devotion towards Gertrude was full of dignity and they were tied in a satisfying heavenly matrimony. Therefore, he is angered that she is indulging herself in the

lustful pleasures of this incestuous marriage and thus, has become a debased woman. To my judgment, the Ghost is speaking from a singularly male-oriented point of view akin to that of his son. Emily Graff points out the important point that the Ghost portrays Gertrude as a lustful widow who is overcome by her sexual desires towards lower class men and finds their charms irresistible. This representation also relates to the popular Renaissance stereotype that lower class men had carnal desires and were more intensely sexually active in bed than noble aristocratic men. Thus, women were sexually attracted to men from lower class. (21) Although Claudius is his younger brother, the Ghost considers him as belonging to a lower class than he and, because he lacks both the inheritance and the nobility enjoyed by Prince Hamlet, the Ghost believes that Claudius had no right to seduce Queen Gertrude to satisfy his lustful nature and to prey upon her unmet needs.

Arguably, the criticism of Gertrude by the Ghost and Hamlet should not be taken under serious consideration because their statements are questionable due to their severe patriarchal perspective. Both of these characters have personal grudges against her and have been hostile towards in their criticism based on their misogynist mindset. That is why we cannot rely on their narrative points about Gertrude.

Refutation of the Traditional Portrayal of Gertrude's Character

Gertrude is the most misrepresented character in the Shakespearean oeuvre because of her corrupt depiction. There is ample textual evidence to support the reality of the injustice done to this character. We hear about Gertrude's imperfection and faults from other male characters, which, for reasons already presented, cannot be considered fair criticism. Due to the limited speech given to her, she does not get adequate chance to say anything in her defense.

Considering several aspects of her actions and dialogue, it can be argued that she is not a lascivious or degenerate woman; rather, she is a person of high moral character, an intelligent co-ruler, a compassionate and loving mother.

To establish the refutations, this part of the chapter will examine the circumstances that lead Gertrude to marrying Claudius. First of all, Gertrude has been criticized for getting married to her brother-in-law Claudius so shortly after her husband's death. In Gertrude's defense, this paper mentions the fact that, after the death of late king Hamlet, Denmark was on the verge of a bloody war with the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras. Many years ago, Prince Fortinbras's father was killed at the hands of late King Hamlet. There were rumors that he wanted to avenge his father's death by attacking Denmark in its fragile political condition and invading the Danish land. Horatio describes the circumstances of Danish land in while he says:

So by his father lost: and this, I take it,

Is the main motive of our preparations,

The source of this our watch and the chief head

Of this post-haste and romagein the land. (1.1.121-124)

From this statement, we can understand that Denmark was in a state of turmoil after the death of King Hamlet the senior and it was very important to quickly stabilize the situation, otherwise the country could have been destroyed by an invasion from Norway. Furthermore, young Prince Hamlet was away in Wittenberg for his studies to take over his father's place as King. In an urgent need to restore stability to governance, Gertrude marries her brother-in-law

Claudius. Given these facts, Gertrude cannot be said to be driven by lust to marry him. In fact, in order to quickly steady the fragile situation in Denmark, she marries Claudius to give the nation a king. This example can be considered as evidence that she is a politically intelligent ruler and that she makes a wise decision in marrying within the family to deal expeditiously with a state of urgency.

As far as Gertrude's hasty marriage is concerned, there is no clear evidence to indicate that Gertrude was an adulterer. After all, widowhood by definition proffers a status of being unmarried. Instead, we may consider her a woman of necessity, her second marriage being merely a matter of adapting to the circumstances. If we look closely at the play, we can see that the depiction of Gertrude does not resonate with these characteristics. We also see her as a loving and concerned mother for her son, as well as an affectionate wife to her husband, and the marital relationship she has with Claudius is domestic and ceremonial; there is no hint of sexuality between these newlyweds. All things considered, we may come to the conclusion that Gertrude marries Claudius to address the political danger that Denmark had been plunged into.

Also, Gertrude is deeply saddened when Hamlet reveals to her that he is angry and frustrated that she married his uncle Claudius. Gertrude's response is by saying, "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain" (3.4.156). Discussing this statement by Gertrude, Rebecca Smith writes, "...she is caught miserably at the center of a desperate struggle between two 'mighty opposites,' her 'heart cleft in twain' (3.4.156) by divided loyalties to husband and son. She loves both Claudius and Hamlet, and their conflict leaves her bewildered and unhappy." ("A heart cleft in Twain" 194). This statement is further evidence for the assertion that Gertrude not only loves

her son, but loves her newly married spouse as well. Understandably she is very hurt to realize that Hamlet thinks her marriage to Claudius is incestuous.

Furthermore, Gertrude drinks Hamlet's poisonous drink despite the plea of Claudius and she dies stating, "I will, my lord. I pray you pardon me (drinks)/No, no, the drink, the drink!—O my dear Hamlet!/The drink, the drink! I am poisoned. (dies)"(5.2.248-250). This particular verse of the scene is very important because Gertrude is seen insisting on drinking from the cup that the audience knows is poisoned. We are to consider that she suspected the drink was tainted and that is why she drank it to save Hamlet's life. It proves how deeply she cared for her son that she would go to the extent of sacrificing her life for him. Similarly, in the article 'Women in Hamlet,' it is written, "In the final scene, Gertrude notices Hamlet is tired during the fight with Laertes, and offers to wipe his brow. She drinks a cup of poison intended for Hamlet by the King, against the King's wishes, and dies" (3). All things considered, it can be concluded that Queen Gertrude was a devoted mother who sacrificed her own life to save her adult child. By the consistent insistence of the suspected poisoned drink we can assume that she drank to save her son's life. Thus, the fact that a queen who is allowed such limited freedom of speech takes the radical, non-verbal action of drinking from a poisoned chalice to save Hamlet's life can be considered an extraordinarily courageous action.

All in all, Gertrude was not only an adoring and devoted mother, but also a woman of valor and moxie. Her decision to marry Claudius was apparently a survival strategy as she was surely aware that marrying a brother-in-law was repudiated by the social order and, that she stood to have to face society's judgment, apart from the harsh criticisms from Hamlet and the ghost of her deceased husband.

Chapter IV

Fearless Cleopatra: The Sensual Queen of Egypt

Antony and Cleopatra is one of William Shakespeare's most famous tragedies. In this play, Shakespeare focuses on the relationship between an Egyptian Queen and a Roman general. Shakespeare's fundamental source for *Antony and Cleopatra* was Plutarch's *Lives*, which was interpreted by Thomas North in 1579. In this book, Plutarch gives an elaborate description of Cleopatra's personal charms, from which Shakespeare took inspiration (*Sources for Antony and Cleopatra* 1-2). The relationship between Antony and Cleopatra is, of course, the focus of this play. Their tragic liaison reminds us of Romeo and Juliet because both couples had to go through many trials to maintain their relationships. *Antony and Cleopatra* was penned in 1606 or 1607, however remained unprinted until the publication of First Folio in 1623.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge regards it as the most wonderful play because of its insight into the depth and energy of lovers' passion (1). Cleopatra, a female pharaoh, is portrayed as the sensual and powerful potentate of Egypt, and Antony as one of the three rivals for leadership of imperial Rome. The play is basically the story of their passionate love affair. Over the course of the play, we see Antony spending most of his time with Cleopatra in her kingdoms, indulging in sexual pleasure with her and neglecting his political responsibilities towards Rome. At one point, Antony marries rival Octavius Caesar's sister, Octavia, in order to make peace with him. Soon after, a vicious war occurs between Octavius and Sextus Pompey. However, instead of going back and joining the war as an ally of Octavius Caesar, as would have been prudent, Antony

goes back to Cleopatra in Egypt, abandoning his newly married wife in Athens. Caesar is infuriated by Antony's negligence to both Rome and his sister. Octavius, subsequently, attacks Egypt and defeats both Antony and Cleopatra. Antony takes his own life, thinking that Cleopatra has been killed, but, in actuality, Cleopatra is alive. In spite of her grief over the loss of her lover, Cleopatra is not frightened by the circumstances, and does not allow her to be taken captive by the Roman army and promptly commits suicide.

Cleopatra is understandably the most important character of the play. She is one of Shakespeare's most effective manifestations of feminine humanity, a captivating lady who wraps powerful men around her finger. She is possessive, seductive, flamboyant and playful. She absolutely respects her own feelings, and she sports a vicious temper. A. L. Rowse reflects on the diverse characteristics and indisputable uniqueness of Queen Cleopatra. He states about the Egyptian monarch, "She is infinitely various, changing from one iridescent mood to another mercurial and bewitching, ready to rage and storm and beat her attendants. She well knew how to seduce Antony's heart and keep him tethered to her...She was an enchantress, almost a sorceress, full of the lore of the East and its credulity, listening to fortune tellers and soothsayers. And yet always, and improbably, she is regal, the descendent of many kings: she is also the incarnation of sex, more so than any other woman in Shakespeare, and in a different kind". (135). Shakespeare's Cleopatra has many dimensions as a character. We get the impression that she was portrayed as the complete antithesis of Renaissance noble women, who were well known for their passive and subservient natures. Therefore, she does not hesitate to voice her opinion, unlike the generally communicatively reticent Renaissance noble woman. It is true that her royal behavior infuses the play with great interest and depth, and that she displays a rather eccentric character. These make for a unique and fascinating portrayal of a female in power by

the author. She not only has feminine charms and persuasive capabilities, but she also evidences a complex nature. Openly portrayed as a voluptuous woman, Cleopatra does not shy away from displaying affection towards Antony in front of anyone. At times, she is seen playing emotional tricks to get his attention. Although she has a dramatic way of expressing her sentiment at times, her unbridled emoting manages to eschew any pretention. On this note, Judith Cook says, "She reminds you all the time that she is the Queen of Egypt and that undertow of her regality, her inherited power, her dynastic blood, is constant throughout the play. (137-138). Cleopatra is without a doubt the progeny of a royal dynasty. Her magnificent personality, her fiery passion, and her expressive speeches reveal a true, independent, and profoundly noble queen.

Shakespeare was quite ahead of his time in portraying strong female characters like Cleopatra, whose personality challenged the patriarchal conventions of the Renaissance. Claire McEachern proffers, "Pioneering feminist forays into Shakespeare's canon, while seeking to compensate for the bias in a critical tradition that has tended to emphasize male characters, male themes, and male fantasies as well as to develop a uniquely feminist criticism capable of searching out "the woman's part discovered in Shakespeare an apparent commitment to the portrayal of liberated female characters, strong in voice and action" (276). Thus, the characterization of Cleopatra is very unique for the Renaissance audiences. Hence, the depiction of Queen Cleopatra's sexuality makes this particular play quite alluring to readers. Her personality is very energetic and the sensuality of her persona takes the plot to a whole other dimension. As becomes obvious when one delves into the works of the time, it was not all that common for Renaissance authors to portray an aristocratic woman as so very open about her sexuality.

Historical Inspiration for Cleopatra's Character Portrayal

Shakespeare's character Cleopatra is inspired by the historical figure Cleopatra VIII. She ruled an empire which not only included Egypt, but also Cyprus, part of modern day Libya, and some territories in the Middle East. She was one of the most powerful women in history, and her reign brought Egypt nearly twenty-two years of stability and prosperity. Despite being a well-born woman, Cleopatra was no stranger to difficult circumstances. For example, she was required to marry her own brothers in accordance with Egyptian traditions and customs regarding royalty that instituted incestuous marriage between siblings. After her father died, she was then married to her older brother. Then again, when her older brother fell in battle, she had no other choice but to wed her younger brother in order to maintain her political role in Egypt. She was wife to him until he died, after which she became the sole ruler of the kingdom. Consequently, she ruled the Egyptian kingdom competently, stabilizing the economy, managing a vast bureaucracy, and curbing corruption in the ranks of priests and officials, while preserving her kingdoms' cohesion and independence with no revolts occurring during her reign. It is speculated that she engaged in associations with these powerful Roman men in order to protect the status of her political fortunes, as well as that of the Egyptian empire.

Cleopatra's Political Autonomy

If we look closely into the historical facts, we may realize that strong female political rulers have always posed a distinct psychological threat to male contemporaries of ancient and Medieval European regimes. In the setting of the Renaissance, the thought of a woman engaging

herself in politics was highly unusual, whereas the domestic household was widely considered the proper domain for a female. For instance, Queen Elizabeth I was recognized as the archetypal strong female political ruler in Europe. Despite being the most powerful woman in the British Commonwealth, she had to suffer through many of the same struggles and challenges faced by any ordinary woman of that time. Shakespeare's Cleopatra, however, is able to defy what amounts to an ancient version of the European patriarchal hegemonic custom. She challenges the customary Roman and therefore Renaissance definition of sex and marriage by playing a different game altogether in her role as a woman and the head of the political system of an ancient country. We observe that there is a political power struggle between Cleopatra and the Roman triumvirate fighting over the corpse of the Roman Republic. Referring to this political conflict between genders, Simone de Beauvoir (1974) points out the complicated relationship between male and female in the field of politics. She avers that there will always be conflicts, "...When two human categories are together, each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon the other. If both are able to resist this imposition, there is created between them a reciprocal relation, sometimes in enmity, sometimes in amity, always in a state of tension" (69). This statement is basically an assertion that of the existence of uneasy relationship between the sexes in the matter of politics. In order to maintain their political power, they will push back against any attempts by the other sex to dominate, and in the process, there may result in a hostile relationship, or they may arrange an accommodating relationship. Whatever the outcome, it will never be an easy relationship. Thus, we can be certain that there will be existence of power struggle between male and female where power is at play. We see such tension between Antony and Cleopatra, even as they are passionately in love with each other. Thus, it is no surprise that a strong woman like Cleopatra was a major threat to the Romans, because, in Shakespeare's

analysis, the Roman political leaders realized that Cleopatra had a stronger hold on Antony than they did. Henceforth, General Agrippa suggests the marriage between Antony and Octavia with the intention of making his fellow general concentrate more on his responsibilities. Eventually, the marriage between Antony and Octavia takes place without a hitch but we find Antony is still drawn to Cleopatra. As one might predict, he leaves his wife of scant days in Greece and goes back to Cleopatra even though Rome is on the verge of a deadly war. It is understandable why Antony turns his back to his country when we see that Cleopatra is a serious strategic player who uses the power of her sexuality to ensnare and hold the general in thrall. He allows himself to be overcome by his sexual desires to such an extent that he is unable to perform his political duties. Throughout the play, Antony is torn between the extravagant pleasures of Egypt and the practicalities of life and responsibilities of Rome. Under those circumstances, Antony's masculinity starts to weaken before the blaze of the bold personality, charm, and seductive qualities of Cleopatra and her court. At one point, he gives Cleopatra the sword he used in the heroic fight at the battle of Philippi, and allows her to dress him up in her clothes and a headdress. In addition, in a kind of despair, he condemns Rome saying, "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch/ of the ranged empire fall" (I.I .35). Antony's willing submission to Cleopatra's sexual authority gives her more power as a political ruler and, naturally, as a woman. Historically, we know that Egypt was dependant on the Roman Empire due to their internal mismanagement. For this reason, Cleopatra wants to secure her position politically with the support of Antony. Cleopatra has a political strategy to assimilate Antony through sex. She wants Egypt to be the superior state. And that is why she does not want Antony to execute his political duties in Rome. Thus, while Antony is in Rome, Cleopatra states, "Seek him, and bring him hither" (1.2. 82). She offers Egypt as a home to Antony with the intention of separating him from

his political obligations in the Roman capital. And she is successful in her plan, as she is able to strengthen her political position by leveraging a passionate fling with Antony into influence over his actions.

Cleopatra's Sexual autonomy

Cleopatra is judged quite harshly for her public display of sensual image for which she has been referred to as a “lustful gypsy” (1.1), ‘strumpet’s fool” (1.1) ,“wrangling queen”(1.1), “whore”(4.12.5.2) and “Egyptian dish” (2.6) by many Roman male characters in the play. Her sexuality, exaggerated expression of emotions, general audacity is seen as atypical of an unseemly for a virtuous woman. Thus, Rukhsana Rahim Chowdhury says, “She displays qualities which were considered very “unnatural” in a woman. It was believed that a ‘natural” woman is domestic and passive and that political self-interest, violence and greed are masculine traits”. (23). For this reason, Cleopatra is victimized from a patriarchal perspective. It is very brave of Shakespeare to portray an exceptional, dauntless female ruler who challenges patriarchal social norms and sets a fine example for female rulers in general. She utilizes the very weapons of patriarchy to affirm her femininity and shows remarkable intelligence in taking necessary political actions in complicated circumstances. For this reason, the imperial Romans accuse Cleopatra of being a degenerate woman without morals but consider Octavia as the embodiment of womanly righteousness. As in the Renaissance, people of the early Roman Empire also revered the ideal of the female being celibate, quiet, submissive, obedient, and conventionally moral. Octavia is portrayed as subservient and meek. On a similar note, Cleopatra’s messenger describes Octavia as “low voic’d”(3.3). Likewise, the messenger further illustrates her cold, and lifeless appearance “She creeps/Her motion and her station are as one/She

shows a body rather than a life” (3.3.19-21) .Her existence as a woman has no vitality; she seems to be motivated entirely by the male authorities in her life. Shakespeare portrays her as a typical aristocratic woman, reserved and compliant, whose desires are to be sacrificed in order to cement an alliance between Octavius and Antony. Octavia’s submissive attitude is further represented in this exchange between her and Antony:

ANTONY: The world and my great office will sometimes

Divide me from your bosom.

OCTAVIA: All which time

Before the gods my knee shall bow my prayers

To them for you (2.3.1-5)

On the other hand, the characteristics of Cleopatra starkly contrast with Octavia’s personality. She is vocal and does not shy away from expressing her opinions. She condemns Antony for his shortcomings and questions his devotion and sincerity towards her. Accordingly, Cleopatra states,

Why should I think you can be mine and true,

Though you in swearing shake the throned gods,

Who have been false to Fulvia? Riotous madness,

To be entangled with those mouth-made vows,

Which break themselves in swearing! (1.3.33-37)

Similarly, she chastises Antony when she does not see any sign of sorrow in him upon the news of his wife Fulvia's death which makes her doubt Antony's love towards her. Thus, she says:

O most false love!

Where be the sacred vials thou shouldst fill

With sorrowful water?

Now I see, I see, in Fulvia's death how mine receive'd shall be (1.3.73-76).

These above statements disclose that Cleopatra would articulate her mind to critique Antony. She is not the kind of passive woman who would act according to the whims and desires of male authority. Thus, with no hesitation, she interrogates Antony's feeling towards her, 'if it be love indeed tell me how much'. She is also not afraid to taunt Antony, "If you find him sad/ Say I am dancing/ if in mirth, report/That I am sudden sick" (1.3.4-6).

The Romans find Cleopatra's open sexuality both undesirable and unacceptable. Queen Cleopatra is portrayed as fearless, free spirited, and comfortable with her own sexuality. And reflecting these personal traits, she questions her eunuch at one point, "I take no pleasure/ In aught an eunuch has/That, being unseminared/ Hast thou affections?" (1.5.12-15). Cleopatra is clearly revealing that she is unable to imagine her life void of sexual pleasure, and thus exhibits a keen curiosity as to whether or not her emasculated servant experiences any carnal desire. Cleopatra understands of what it is to be a woman, paired with her daring displays of sexual desires for Antony seems eccentric to the Romans. Thus she is not considered as the ideal marital partner for Antony, regardless of the evident strength of their bond and love. Despite that,

she exercises her sexual control over Antony. In contrast, Octavia epitomizes the attributes of an ideal Roman spouse. She embodies dutifulness, docility, devotion, and deference as his better half, and that is why her fellow citizens consider her an ideal spouse for Antony although they have no passion or affection for each other as a pair. This vast contrast of acceptance in society represents the patriarchal mindset of Roman social order.

Even at death, Cleopatra demonstrates autonomy .After Octavius defeats Cleopatra in war, he lands his troops in the capital of Egypt, Alexandria, forcing Cleopatra's surrender, and making plans to take her to Rome as his captive. She also comes to know that Octavius has intentions of displaying her in the Roman triumph parade. Cleopatra realizes that if she wants to remain alive, she has no other choice but to accept Octavius's terms, including captivity. But her deep self-respect and independent nature will not tolerate being a prisoner of the Roman emperor. Subsequently, she states, " My resolution and my hands I'll trust? /None about Caesar" (4.15. 50-51).A proud, self-sufficient queen, she refuses to accede to Octavius's demands especially that of displaying herself as a defeated monarch in the triumph parade. Cleopatra expresses her strong preference for embracing death with dignity rather than becoming a shameful exhibit of Octavius's victory:

This mortal house I'll ruin,

Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I

Will not wait pinion'd at your master's court,

Nor once be chastis'd with the sober eye

Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up
 And show me to the shouting varletry
 Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
 Be gentle grave unto me! rather on Nilus' mud
 Lay me stark nak'd, and let the water-flies
 Blow me into abhorring! rather make
 My country's high pyramides my gibbet,
 And hang me up in chains! (5.2, 64-75) .

This speech is Cleopatra's avowal that she would rather die in her own country than be humiliated in front of the Romans. Tragic as it may be, Cleopatra decides to take her own life by allowing a poisonous asp to bite her on her chest. Egyptians believed that dying from poisonous snakebite brings immortality, and chasing this mode of death, she wanted to remain immortal and to be remembered honorably by her subjects. She embraces her death in a glorious way. In her final moments, she says, "what's brave, what's noble...make death proud to take us" (4.15.89-92). Such is her last display of her own sovereignty and volition.

Following her death, Octavius acknowledges her courage, self-respect, and determination by commenting, "Bravest at the last? She levell'd at our purposes, and being royal/Took her own way," (5.3. 290). Showing the queen respect after death can be interpreted in the light of the double standard of male chauvinist society because, if she were alive, Octavius

would have chosen to display her as his trophy in the parade of triumph, but since she commits suicide, Octavius pays homage to her courage and dignity. At the end, the play indicates that Cleopatra's death was essential for the return of force into male hands and indicates the sad outcome of extremely influential, potent, authoritative females having power in a world not prepared to allow them to keep.

For the most part, many male leaders in the Renaissance era were known to have had countless relationships with various women, and it was expected as the rightful option for male royalty. On the contrary, female monarchs of the time were expected to be celibate, maidenly, and virtuous. But, Shakespeare depicts Egyptian queen Cleopatra completely contrary to this traditional expectation of her times and of his. Her robust personality, spirited nature, sensuality, erotic adventurism make her the complete and obvious opposite of the traditional Renaissance aristocratic woman and also of the customary Roman aristocratic woman. Thus, she becomes the victim of harsh criticism and the expected tragic outcome.

Chapter V

Conclusion

The dramatic personages of the Duchess of Malfi, Queen Gertrude, and Cleopatra are very different from the traditional ideal of the Renaissance woman. They do not exhibit the subservient and docile attitudes that the societal standard connotes. Rather, they display courage, strength, and assertiveness. Although they represent royal women belonging to noble families, they do not hesitate to defy a misogynistic social order to accomplish their own aspirations and to fulfill their personal desires. But in doing so, they have to suffer from tragic consequences which result in their deaths. It is an illustration of the fact that, although aristocratic women had access to a luxurious life, they were never considered as equal to their male counterparts. Their lives were controlled by male authorities who urged them not to cross the threshold of personal autonomy. If they dared to do so, they were doomed to suffer a dreadful outcome. Thus, it reinforces the perception that aristocratic women did not have any liberty to pursue their individual desires. They were forbidden from expressing or fulfilling their own wants, sexual, marital, or otherwise.

Such as, in the in the play *The Duchess of Malfi*, we see that the Duchess is an assured woman, but, after the death of her husband the Duke, her life is restricted by the male authorities she is surrounded with. Although she yearns to marry again, to do so would mean that her life would be endangered and that her dukedom could be snatched away from her. She does not even have the right to openly declare her desire for second matrimonial union. Consequently, she has no other option except to keep her new marriage discreet. When the news of her secret union is

revealed, she has to elope with her husband and children in order to save their lives. She is deprived of the liberty to disclose her marriage, either to the society she is a part of, or to her menacing brothers, without undesirable consequences.

Additionally, despite being the reigning queen of Denmark, Gertrude, mother of Prince Hamlet, does not have the independence and full authority to rule her nation solely as a widowed queen in the play *Hamlet*. For this reason, she is required to marry again to maintain the political authority to govern her kingdom, which needs new leadership to stabilize the political situation. Moreover, although she is a queen, she does not have the authority to voice her opinions or to direct the Danish parliament. That is why, instead of revealing to everyone that Hamlet's drink is poisoned, she silently consumes the tainted drink and sacrifices her life for the sake of her son. It is representative of the fact that Renaissance aristocratic woman did not have even the freedom to speak the truth as they saw it.

Furthermore, Cleopatra meets with tragic consequences because of her pursuit of personal ambitions in the play *Antony and Cleopatra*. She is the powerful ruler of the Egyptian kingdoms in the time of the ascendancy of the Roman Empire. Because she is a distaff monarch, she is forced to depend on powerful Roman males to secure her position politically. In spite of that position, she is not shielded from harsh criticism over her choice to conduct a passionate and conspicuous love affair with Marc Antony. Such open sexuality was accepted in male pharaohs, but female sovereigns engaging in such honest relations were viewed, at least in Roman quarters, as morally corrupt. For this reason, she is damned in part for acting on her concupiscence.

These three women monarchs can be considered as examples of noblewomen who did not fit into the Renaissance social mold. In order to conform to the conventions of society, a

woman had to comply with known social traditions and to embrace the roles reserved for women. Although the age of rebirth was known for its considerable contributions to human civilization, the life of women was still strictly regulated by the hegemonic customs created by the men of the ruling families and male authorities in government and the Church. For this reason, the quality of women's life in the Renaissance was stunted. Despite living in an age of invention, progress, and expansion, women were prohibited from sexual initiative or any right to engage themselves in matrimonial union without the approval of the relevant male authorities. The result of which was to deny them the fulfilling of their own desires, sexual or otherwise. These three women were bold enough to break away from the social conventions in their settings, but their valiant actions led them to meet with tragic consequences. The message is simple: If women of the Renaissance wished to develop themselves according to the gifts of their potential, and to avoid being banished to oblivion by the dominant male ascendancy, then they had better learn to "fit in".

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