The Rebellious Voice of Women in Renaissance Drama:
A Case Study of The Tragedy of Mariam and The Duchess of Malfi

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts (Literature) to Yarmouk University

July, 2012
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature and Criticism at the Department of English Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

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Yarmouk University
July 2012
Dedication

To those whom I did not choose, but loved them so much

To those who were the reason of my success:

My Father and My Mother

Ibrahim and Jamila

And to my beloved people in this life: my brothers and my
sisters:

Suhib, Mohammad, Ruba, and Rasha
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Mahmoud Al-Shra’a for his patience, continual fruitful suggestions, encouragement, constructive comments and guidance during the course of this study.

I am also grateful to the distinguished members of the supervisory committee Dr. Lamia Hammad and Dr. Tha’er Al Kadi for their patience in reading the final draft and for their enriching remarks.

Thanks also are due to my colleagues with whom I spent many joyful and useful hours.
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Abstract

The Rebellious Voice of Women in Renaissance Drama: A Case Study of The Tragedy of Mariam and The Duchess of Malfi

By

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Supervisor

Dr. Mahmoud Al-Shra’a

The study has attempted to analyze two plays, Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam (1613), and John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1612). The study focuses on the two main characters Mariam and the Duchess and compares and contrasts between them. These plays, which relate to many topics, were selected to highlight women’s rights. Categories like women, feminism, misogynist, gender studies, silence, and obedience are placed under focus in these plays. This analysis shows the tyranny against women, and their revolution against their social status. The outcome of this analysis endeavors to present new kind of heroines who want to change the traditional stereotype about women. The study also attempts to propose feminist explanations for these characters.

Elizabeth Cary focuses on Mariam in The Tragedy of Mariam. The figure of Mariam has been of tremendous interest to feminist critics who view her as a character embodying the contradictions of female identity in patriarchal culture. Cary presents
Mariam who has two choices in her life; either to let her inner voice out and speak loudly or to be submissive to male authority. She refuses to be under male authority any more. On the other hand, John Webster presents the patriarchal way of looking at the case of the Duchess who tries to revolt against her society and against her brothers. She refuses to be subservient to men and successfully embodies the role of a powerful woman in the Renaissance period.

The conclusion sums up the views stated in the thesis and propose the general evaluation of these heroines. The conclusion draws up the development of the rebellious voice of women especially in the modern time. The focus will be on A Doll's House (1879) written by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) that shows the changing role of women in the modern time, and it shows the growth of women's self-consciousness.

**Keywords:** women, feminism, misogynist, gender studies, silence, and obedience.
Chapter One

Introduction

Throughout the ages, women have encountered many problems and difficulties in their lives. They are treated as a property, and they are deprived of the power to prove or assert their selfhood. Women are also controlled by their parents in their childhood, and then handed over to their husbands who control their lives as well. Unmarried girls have to live as nuns in convents under male authority. Critics of misogyny say that women should only appear in the margin of history, and they are born to be subjected to male-authority. They consider women as a source of trouble in their society starting from Eve who is believed to be responsible for all of human misery because of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. They accuse her of entering the province of men “your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as gods knowing good and evil” (qtd. In Findlay, 1999, P. 12). We can say that Eve is a good woman, but the serpent allures her to eat the Fruit of Knowledge.

In the Renaissance period, women are expected to be dutiful to their fathers and husbands. They are supposed to restrict themselves to feminine activities, such as child-rearing. Women allegedly play negative roles in their society and adopt men’s viewpoints. Even mothers at home widen the gap between males and females by the way they raise their children. They believe that masculinity, unlike femininity, is identified
with strength, responsibility, and success. Nawal El Saadawi says that family does not support their ambitious daughters.

My brother took a bigger piece of meat than me, gobbled it up and drank his soup noisily and my mother never said a word. But I was different: I was a girl. I had to watch every movement I made, hide my longing for the food, eat slowly and drink my soup without a sound (qtd. Athamneh, 2008, P. 4).

Therefore, many women writers focus on the inequality that women themselves impose upon their own sex as mothers. This quotation shows the traditional view of gender differences on the children.

At that time, many misogynist writers try to attack women by presenting them as bad figures. They show women as a source of all troubles in this world and present them as bad figures. Hence, Katherine Henderson and Barbara Mcmanu (1985) comment in their book *Half Humankind Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England 1540-1640* that “Since the very beginning, “half humankind”-the female of the species- has been an irresistible subject for the pens of the other half. When men have been the subject of written scrutiny or attack, they have been viewed primarily as individuals or as members of a group (such as profession, a social class, an ethnic group) rather than as representatives of their half of the human race” (p. 3). The misogynistic writers draw a negative image of women that is related to sexuality, enticement, insanity and deceitfulness. At that time, women have no choice to change this bad image.
To confirm this idea, Renaissance writers focus on the negative role of women, for example, Benjamin Jonson (1572-1637) presents the typical image of women in the Renaissance period in his song *That Women Are But Men's Shadows*.

Follow a shadow, it still flies you;  
Seem to fly it, it will pursue:  
So court a mistress, she denies you;  
Let her alone, she will court you.  
Say, are not women truly then  
Styled but the shadows of us men?  
At morn and even shades are longest,  
At noon they are or short or none;  
So men at weakest, they are strongest,  
But grant us perfect, they're not known.  
Say, are not women truly then.

We can clearly conclude from the title of Johnson’s poem that he depicts women’s roles negatively. They are considered as servants to men. Men are strong even when they are weak. In contrast, he presents men who cannot do any wrong doing as an ideal image. Commenting on his song, Kathleen Mcluskie (1989) says in her book *Renaissance Dramatists* that “The resulting poem is not one of Jonson’s best but it is a witty enough exercise in which the most obvious attributes of shadows are found analogies for the most obvious characteristics of a hypostatised woman”(p. 161-162).

The issue of the suppressed women is considered as a rich area for play writers to write about the Greek era. Jeanne Addison Roberts (2002) says that “A continually intriguing puzzle in the study of Greek drama is why an Athenian society, which according to all accounts suppressed and ghettoized women, should have produced plays
with such strong central female characters as Clytemnestra, Electra, Jocasta, Phaedra, Helen, Iphigenia, Agave, Alcestis, Medea, and Antigone” (p. 201). This issue is also an area of interest for Greek writers like Euripides who wrote a prominent play entitled Medea in which the heroine, Medea, revolts against her repressed conditions. Her reaction against men is severe. She decides to take revenge by killing her children as a reaction against her husband’s betrayal. She revolts against being inferior in her society and complains against repressive conditions imposed upon women in general. Medea raises the status of women in her society, and she says that women are treated as inferior to men which is not fair “Of all creatures that can feel and think, we women are the worst treated things alive” (p. 275). At the beginning of the play, Medea presents the negative image of the female in Greece who is treated as a slave.

Medea: Men tell us we live safe and secure at home, while they must go to battle with their spears. How stupid they are! I'd rather stand there three times in battle holding up my shield than give birth once (p. 290).

Medea challenges her society and calls for equality. She focuses on the role of women in her society. In this quotation, Medea obviously shows the patriarchal image of women, namely to sitting in their houses and to doing feminine duties, while men do their masculine works. Here, Medea challenges the patriarchal society and says that women endure more than men in the simplest thing which is childbirth. She also declares her rejection of the negative role of women expressed by men.
In the Renaissance period, women never take fair share in lawmaking procedures and are silenced by men in their society. They lead a miserable life and they face the tyranny that characterized the legal judgment of old times.

Woman can’t defend herself, because she is a woman she ailed to say so? Told her the man was alive, and stood there… then he examined her what she meant to confess all this, if it were false? She answered they had threatened her if she would, she should have mercy showed her-which she said with such simplicity that (the witness brought against her being of little force, and her own confession appearing now to be of less) she was easily believed innocent and [ac] quitted. (qtd. In Raber, 2002, p. 321)

Under such severe circumstances, women revolt against their miserable conditions. They prove their identities to get away from the unfair masculine’s authority, to defend their rights and attain equality with men. They want to fight against tyranny and patriarchy. Women get away from men’s control, and they want to discover new things different from patriarchal society through “the acquisition of knowledge as a step towards God that reverses patriarchal interpretations of the Eden story. Femininity, as represented by Eve, symbolizes openness to experience and growth, whereas paternal law is prohibition and confinement” (Findlay, 1999, p.21). Accordingly, many women have a desire to discover new things like freedom.

Women are generally characterized as bad figures. During the Renaissance period, Richard Cave (1988) argues in The Duchess of Malfi: Texts and Performance that “To