

# Goddesses, daughters, wives and flower girls

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**Abstract**

The role of women in society has changed with the passing of time and this is reflected in literature. This paper aims to present the evolution of female characters –both main and secondary characters– from the Renaissance period to the 20th century through the study of three representative theatre plays by Marlowe, Shakespeare and Shaw. Being very rarely praised, women will fight against submission in an attempt to acquire some freedom.

**Keywords:** Women, Drama, Pygmalion, Othello, Doctor Faustus

**Título:** Diosas, hijas, esposas y floristas.

**Resumen**

El papel de la mujer en la sociedad ha ido variando con el paso del tiempo y ello ha quedado reflejado en la literatura. Este artículo pretende mostrar la evolución de los personajes femeninos –tanto protagonistas como secundarios– desde el Renacimiento hasta el siglo XX a través de tres obras teatrales representativas de Marlowe, Shakespeare y Shaw. Siendo valoradas en muy pocas ocasiones, las mujeres pasarán de la sumisión a la revolución en su búsqueda de la libertad.

**Palabras clave:** Mujeres, Teatro, Pígalión, Otelo, Doctor Fausto.

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The situation of women in society has tremendously changed with the passing of time. According to the conventions of each period, women have had several different roles, these being reflected in many literary works. Sometimes being praised, but mostly being rejected and treated as inferior, women have been somehow forced to react against male supremacy. However, they have fought for centuries in order to acquire a little respect and something similar to equality, things for which they still fight nowadays. Unsurprisingly, contemporary feminist critics have been particularly severe with those authors mistreating their female characters. This article is aimed at analysing the female characters in the plays *Doctor Faustus*, *Othello* and *Pygmalion* and how these characters portray the role of women in the period in which these three plays were written and performed.

First of all, in *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* only one single female character is found and this is Helen of Troy. Taking into account that *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* was first published in 1604 and that medieval romances were still popular in the Renaissance period, one can say that this character is praised as if she were the lady of a medieval romance, the knight –in this case, several knights– behaving according to the code of courtly love. Consequently, she is honoured and flattered by the three scholars and by Faustus himself:

“FIRST SCHOLAR. Master Doctor Faustus, since our conference about fair ladies, which was the beautifulest in all the world, we have determined with ourselves that Helen of Greece was the admirablest lady that ever lived [...]

SECOND SCHOLAR. Too simple is my wit to tell her praise,  
whom all the world admires for majesty.

THIRD SCHOLAR. No marvel though the angry Greeks pursu'd  
with ten years' war the rape of such a queen,  
whose heavenly beauty passeth all compare.

FIRST SCHOLAR. Since we have seen the pride of Nature's works,  
And only paragon of excellence,  
Let us depart; and for this glorious deed  
Happy and blest be Faustus evermore!

FAUSTUS. O, thou art fairer than the evening air  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;  
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter  
When he appear'd to hapless Semele;  
More lovely than the monarch of the sky  
In wanton Arethusa's azur'd arms;  
And none but thou shalt be my paramour!"  
(Marlowe, 1604: end of the play)

Notice the use of the word *paramour*, meaning "illicit lover", for the ladies courted by a knight in medieval times were often married. Moreover, Helen of Troy could be an inspiration for Faustus since he assures "I will be Paris, and for love of thee,/ Instead of Troy, shall Wertenberg be sack'd;/ And I will combat with weak Menelaus,/ And wear thy colours on my plumed crest;/ Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel,/ And then return to Helen for a kiss" (Marlowe, 1604: end of the play) in the same way that ladies in romances inspired the knight in his deeds.

It must be taken into account that the way Helen of Troy is treated in this play, probably for her mythical origin, does not coincide with the situation that most women were living at that age. Their inferiority and dependence on their husbands or fathers was something common which continued to be present in the following centuries as will be clearly seen in the portrayal of Desdemona, the main female character in Renaissance Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice*.

Desdemona is presented as a very calm and quiet character which, at the very beginning of the play, abandons her father in order to live with the Moor, Othello. Though very respectful towards her father, Desdemona states: "and so much duty as my mother showed/ To you, preferring you before her father,/ So much I challenge that I may profess/ Due to the Moor my lord" (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 226), this showing that untying from one man to bind another was something traditional and had occurred in previous generations. The submission and naivety of Desdemona can be inferred from many actions and situations, but they are especially relevant in the third scene of the fourth act, just after she has been accused of infidelity. Though she knows that all that has been said about the relationship between Cassio and herself is false, she does not try to defend herself from the accusations made against her and she silently follows the orders given by her husband: "OTHELLO: Get you to bed. [...] DESDEMONA: I will, my lord." (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 356). Moreover, her unconditional love is portrayed in her words to Emilia: "DESDEMONA: We must not now displease him. EMILIA: I would you have never seen him. DESDEMONA: So would not I: my love doth so approve him/ That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns-/ Prithee unpin me- have grace and favour in them." (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 357). She even justifies Othello's attitude in the words she sings: "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve" (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 359). Obviously, feminist criticism totally disagrees with this image of a patient, submissive and void-of-personality wife and praises Emilia for her words, understanding that she strives for equality:

"But I do think it is their husbands' faults  
If wives do fall [...]  
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know,  
Their wives have sense like them; they see and smell,  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour  
As husbands have. [...]  
And have not we affections,  
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?  
Then let them use us well: else let them know  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so."  
(Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 362)

Despite the speech above, Emilia proves to be as docile as Desdemona: "DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed (be unfaithful) for all the world? EMILIA: Why? Would not you? DESDEMONA: No, by this heavenly light. EMILIA: Nor I neither, by this heavenly light: I might do't as well i'th' dark [...] Who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?" (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 360 & 361). Here we see two different kinds of submission, the first, displayed by

Desdemona, more innocent, since she would never be unfaithful to Othello, and the second, represented by Emilia, more pragmatic, because Emilia would commit infidelity if something profitable to her husband came out of it, her submission being exactly the same to that of Desdemona except for the experience of Emilia in contrast to the inexperience of the protagonist.

Bianca, a secondary female character, seems to be different from Emilia and Desdemona, since she is a promiscuous and a dishonest prostitute. Nevertheless, once she has a strong feeling towards Cassio she behaves in the same way Emilia and Desdemona do, devoting all of her time to Cassio. She appears to be worried after Cassio's long absence: "What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights?/ Eight-score eight hours? And lover's absent hours/ more tedious than the dial eight-score times! O weary reckoning!" and to be jealous by the probability of another woman being in his life: "This is some token of a newer friend" (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 323). In this way, Bianca loses all the independence that she once had.

It is mostly Bianca and Emilia who represent the commodification of women. Emilia's words describe in a perfect manner the way women were treated by men at that age, they were nothing but mere objects of pleasure or useful workers and men were "all but stomachs, and we all but food;/ They eat us hungerly, and when they are full/ They belch us" (Shakespeare, 2006 [1622]: 319).

Then, the three female characters in *Othello*, though having some qualms about it, become submissive, obeying male orders and protecting their husbands or lovers even when facing the most extreme consequences; for instance, Emilia gives the handkerchief to Iago and claims not to know anything of Iago having it and Desdemona tries to hide that she has been fatally wounded by Othello.

Finally, in Shaw's *Pygmalion, a Romance in Five Acts* we appreciate the transformation of a woman who rebels against the treatment she receives. Liza, the protagonist, is treated as an object, for she is sold as property by her father ("DOOLITTLE: The girl belongs to me. [...] and you are the last man alive to expect me to let her go for nothing [...] What's a five-pound note to you? And what's Eliza to me?" (Shaw, 2003 [1914]: 42 & 45)) and said to be a creation by Higgins: "It's the most absorbing experiment I ever tackled", "You will jolly see whether she has an idea that I havnt put into her head or a word that I havnt put into her mouth. I tell you I have created this thing..." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]: 65 & 93). Nonetheless, Liza, realising that Professor Higgins has treated her rudely and badly from the very beginning, talks to Pickering in this way:

" He said he could teach me. Well, here I am ready to pay him -not asking any favor- and he treats me as if I was dirt." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]: 26)

"The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]: 95)

Although the last quotation is related to social differences, the important thing is how the fact that Higgins shows no respect for Liza leads her to assert herself as an equal, in this case to middle class people. However, feminist critics have considered hers a claim for gender equality and have seen in the words of the main character a rebellion against the impositions of men in the society at that time, a time –from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century– when the first wave of the feminist movement was arising. Liza is, then, highly praised for standing firm on her position:

"I don't care how you treat me. I don't mind your swearing at me. I don't mind a black eye: I've had one before this. But [*standing up and facing him*] I won't be passed over. [...] Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]. 99 & 104).

It has been argued that this is the real transformation of Liza and not that of learning to speak a correctly pronounced English. Moreover, Higgins is so surprised, and at the same time proud, of this inner transformation that he states: "I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this. [...] Now you're a tower of strength: a consort battleship." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]: 104 & 105).

As for secondary characters, Mrs Pearce is portrayed as passive, always following Higgins orders in the same way that Liza does but with the difference that the main character eventually rebels –in the slippers' episode– against this inferiority to which they are subjected. On the other hand, Mrs Higgins is the other strong female character in the work, since she openly speaks her mind and opposes male figures, thus, helping other female characters: "if you suppose for a

moment that she doesn't give herself away in every sentence she utters, you must be perfectly cracked about her [...] You two infinitely stupid male creatures." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]:64 & 67). Knowing this, Liza resorts to her in order to be helped and Higgins' mother shows to be totally in favour of the Liza's rebellion –although, usually, the older a woman was, the more deeply-rooted and used to the age's conventions she was–:

"MRS. HIGGINS. Eliza came to me this morning. She passed the night partly walking about in a rage, partly trying to throw herself into the river and being afraid to, and partly in the Carlton Hotel. She told me of the brutal way you two treated her [...] And then you were surprised because she threw your slippers at you! I should have thrown the fire-irons at you." (Shaw, 2003 [1914]: 91)

In conclusion, the three plays show that admiration towards women, sometimes seen as goddesses, was very exceptional. The playwrights mainly highlight the evolution of women during the centuries and their pass from a submissive attitude and way of life to an unavoidable and needed rebellion so as to acquire a little freedom. The fact that literary works reflect the barriers that women had to surpass is, at least, ironic, since many of the restrictions that they had to suffer were related with the reading and writing of literature, their works being despised and them being forced to use male pseudonyms.

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