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Stillness in the Storm: Women's Emotional Restraint and Symbolic Death from Shakespeare to Ford

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Abstract

Shakespeare offers a rich and nuanced depiction of life, portraying characters from all levels of society. His works form a unique gallery of stock figures, representing a wide range of male and female archetypes. Several female characters stand out for their lasting impact on audiences. Some are depicted as strong and dynamic, engaging in manipulation or corruption and ultimately meeting death as a consequence. Others are shown as vulnerable and defenseless, silenced by madness, despair, or a resigned acceptance of death. Notable examples include Ophelia, Cordelia, Viola, Titania, and Imogen. This tradition of portraying women caught in the tension between resilience and vulnerability continued in the Jacobean and Caroline periods, where playwrights like Beaumont and Fletcher, John Webster, Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, Philip Massinger, and John Ford crafted equally memorable yet tragic female characters. In these plays, women often suffer quietly amid turbulent emotional and political contexts, their beauty and openness leaving them exposed to manipulation, exploitation, and eventual erasure. Some characters, such as Bellario and Imogen, survive physically but experience a symbolic death by the play's end. From Shakespeare to Ford, the theatrical tradition reflects a culture of systemic oppression and male dominance, suppressing women in various historical and geographical settings whether in reimagined ancient Rome or contemporary Europe yet always refracted through the conservative social values of early modern England.

These characters embody recurring female archetypes whose stories reveal the patriarchal forces that shaped their fates. Modern critical perspectives, particularly feminist readings, have reexamined these works, challenging the societal norms that denied women autonomy. Psychoanalytic interpretations further highlight the deep psychological trauma these characters endure, showing how societal shame and guilt push them toward death whether

literal or symbolic rather than allowing them to live with dignity. The present study examines selected characters from representative plays of the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline eras, aiming to explore the various factors that led these unfortunate women to lose hope in society.

Keywords: female archetype, stock characters, tragic heroines, vulnerability, manipulations, patriarchy, gender oppression, madness, cultural conservatism, feminism, psychoanalysis.

Introduction

From the late Elizabethan through the Jacobean and Caroline periods a span of roughly four to five decades English drama evolved amid significant social and political upheaval. Playwrights engaged closely with these transformations, embedding their works within a cultural framework marked by patriarchal dominance and conservative gender ideologies. Women in these dramas were constrained by male authority, shaped by moral codes that ostensibly applied to both sexes but were enforced far more rigorously upon females. While male characters' sufferings often arose from personal flaws or ambition, female suffering derived from systemic repression constant surveillance, limited autonomy, and rigid gender expectations. Patriarchal control was both explicit and implicit, with men cast as custodians of morality, exercising control as a natural right. Tragedies tended to privilege the male hero's emotional journey, relegating female trauma; psychological breakdowns, exploitation, and death to the margins or plot devices provoking superficial lament. The emotional complexity and suffering of women remained underexplored despite their centrality to the plays' moral conflicts.

Key female figures such as Shakespeare's Ophelia and John Ford's Calantha and Annabella embody this tension between societal constraint and personal vulnerability. Their virtues beauty, innocence, sincerity; become liabilities rather than strengths. Love and freedom for women were systematically suppressed by social conformity: daughters could not choose husbands, wives were barred from gazing at men outside marriage. These restrictions, framed as moral safeguards, functioned primarily to control female agency. Consequently, women characters often faced a double bind: resistance risked scandal and ruin, compliance meant erasure of selfhood. Their suffering serves as both personal tragedy and implicit critique of a patriarchal system that silenced women's voices and desires.

Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' (c. 1599–1601), rooted in a medieval Scandinavian revenge legend, reflects the Elizabethan fascination with political and moral upheaval. Hamlet, the archetypal tragic hero, dominates the narrative, but Ophelia's fate invites a psycho-feminist reading of gendered power dynamics. Subjected to psychological trauma and caught between Hamlet's demands and her father Polonius's political ambitions, Ophelia's death by drowning remains a profound yet under-examined tragedy. Her demise exemplifies how patriarchal structures extinguish female autonomy and voice.

The Jacobean tragedy 'The Maid's Tragedy' (1619) by Beaumont and Fletcher presents Evadne, a royal mistress turned vengeful wife. Evadne's transformation interrogates contemporary ideals of virtue and morality, revealing tensions between individual agency and societal expectations. Similarly, Middleton's 'Women Beware Women' (c. 1612–1627) centers on Bianca, whose beauty and desires both empower and doom her. The play highlights how female sexuality was a precarious locus of power and vulnerability within a male-dominated social order, where manipulation by men curtailed women's freedom.

John Ford's Caroline-era dramas further this exploration. Calantha in 'The Broken Heart' (1633) exemplifies emotional restraint: she projects strength yet suffers profound vulnerability beneath the surface, ultimately dying of a broken heart. Her fate underscores the era's expectation that women

suppress emotional expression, often at great personal cost. Ford's Spinella similarly embodies the gendered limitations of the time, reinforcing the thematic continuity across these periods.

This study employs psychoanalytic and feminist frameworks to analyze four emblematic female characters spanning the Elizabethan to Caroline eras: Ophelia, Evadne, Bianca, and Calantha. Central concepts 'stillness in the storm,' 'gendered silence,' 'emotional restraint,' and 'symbolic death' anchor the analysis. 'Stillness in the storm' metaphorically captures how these women endure emotional and political turmoil silently. Their enforced silence and internalization of suffering reveal the pervasive mechanisms of patriarchal control. 'Emotional restraint' is particularly significant, describing how female characters suppress outward signs of distress, culminating either in literal death or a 'symbolic death' a psychological or social erasure marking the end of their narrative agency. Such symbolic deaths expose that survival within the text does not equate to liberation but often signifies ongoing marginalization. Far from weakness, this restraint operates as a coded performance of suffering under male authority, a dramatic device resolving female conflict through corporeal or symbolic death.

Ultimately, these plays reflect and critique a social order designed by and for men, one that constrains women's identities and silences their desires. By foregrounding the experiences of female characters and employing feminist psychoanalytic critique, this study reveals how early modern drama embodies complex negotiations of gender, power, and agency. The tragic fate of these women underscores the limits imposed by patriarchal society, inviting continued reflection on the historical conditions that shaped and continue to shape female subjectivity in literature and beyond.

Drowning in Madness: The Tragic Descent of Ophelia

Ophelia is one of the most beautiful women in English literature, portrayed in 'Hamlet' as delicate, naïve, and an obedient daughter. She embodies purity and innocence. Though Shakespeare never gives a direct, physical description of her beauty, it is conveyed through the words and perceptions of others in the play. Hamlet himself calls her "The fair Ophelia" in Act 3, Scene 1, a phrase that suggests not only outward beauty but also moral and inner grace. In Act 4, Scene 5, after her father's death and without Hamlet returning his body; Ophelia speaks to her brother in a stream of flower-filled imagery. Every line she utters is laced with delicate blossoms: "O rose of May," "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance," "there's fennel for you and columbine," and "There's a daisy." These floral references reveal her gentle, fragile nature. Queen Gertrude, in Act 4, Scene 7, even describes her as a "mermaid-like" figure. But Ophelia herself, in that same Act 4, Scene 5, likens her own condition to the fading flowers:

> "There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died: they say he made a good end." (Shakespeare, 2010: 118)

Ophelia's beauty, then, is not celebrated in straightforward, physical terms; rather, it is reflected through the metaphors others use especially flowers, which symbolize her purity and fragility. Beyond her beauty, Ophelia's role in the play is defined by obedience and submission. She listens without question to her father Polonius, her brother Laertes, and even King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. When Laertes warns her about Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 3, she responds dutifully: "I shall the effect of this good lesson keep, / as watchman to my heart." (Shakespeare, 2010: 42-43) She accepts his guidance without protest, agreeing to guard herself against Hamlet's advances. Later in the same scene, Polonius orders her not to meet Hamlet again, and she replies without hesitation: "I shall obey, my lord." (Shakespeare, 2010: 45) Her compliance extends to political schemes as well. When Claudius and Polonius decide to use her to learn the truth about Hamlet's strange behavior, she obeys:

> "Ophelia, walk you here. Gracious, so please you.
>
> will bestow ourselves. Read on this book…" (Shakespeare, 2010: 79)

Even though she likely knows she is being used, Ophelia accepts her role, a reflection of the patriarchal culture of her time. She is unable or perhaps unwilling to resist. Her submissiveness continues even during the harsh "nunnery scene" in Act 3, Scene 1, when Hamlet insults her. She answers politely: "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so." (Shakespeare, 2010: 81) Ophelia never openly questions the men around her. Her politeness and readiness to accept any proposal reflect the severe limitations placed on women in her society.

The mental collapse that follows her father's death eventually leads to her drowning. Raised without a mother who is never mentioned in the play Ophelia relies entirely on her father and brother for guidance. That dependency, ingrained from childhood, deepens her obedience. Tragedy strikes quickly: she is warned against Hamlet by her family, Hamlet behaves erratically and mistreats her, and then she learns that Hamlet has killed her father. With Laertes away in France, Ophelia's grief has no safe outlet. She can only express it through song and symbolic imagery, losing her ability to speak normally an indication of her madness.

Elaine Showalter describes her condition as "female love-melancholy, or erotomania." As a refined and gentle young woman, Ophelia shows no anger toward anyone; instead, she internalizes her pain until it shatters her mind. Speaking to Queen Gertrude in Act 4, Scene 5, she laments:

"He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone;

At his head a grass-green turf,

At his heels a stone." (Shakespeare, 2010: 114)

Her depression and death stem from losing her main protector her father at the hands of the man she loved. Earlier, in Act 3, Scene 1, Hamlet had already questioned her honesty: "Ha ha, are you honest?" (Shakespeare, 2010: 81) before rejecting her and hurling cruel words:

"If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy

Dowry; be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt

Not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go; farewell,

Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know

Well enough what monster you make of them. To a nunnery

Go, and quickly too." (Shakespeare, 2010: 81-82)

Despite this humiliation, Ophelia still shows compassion for Hamlet, praying for his sanity. But Hamlet's public rejection, followed by his killing of her father, destroys her trust in men. Jacques Lacan observes that, after this rejection, "Hamlet no longer treats Ophelia like a woman at all. She becomes in his eyes the child-bearer to every sin, a future 'breeder of sinners,' destined to succumb to every calumny… In short, what is taking place here is the destruction and loss of the object." (Lacan, 22-23) Before and after her father's death, Ophelia is drawn into political manipulation used by Polonius, Claudius, and even Gertrude to spy on Hamlet. When Laertes is away, she faces these horrors alone. Her sense of identity is tied entirely to the men in her life, and without them, she loses herself. This frustration is not an act of rebellion but the slow crushing of her spirit through political exploitation, romantic betrayal, and social isolation. Citing feminist critic Carol Neely, Showalter remarks: "Her tragedy is subordinated in the play; unlike Hamlet, she does not struggle with moral choices or alternatives." (Showalter, 1985) In the same article, Showalter quotes Lee Edwards, who notes: "We can imagine Hamlet's story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet."

(Showalter, 1985) Therefore, in the play's narrative, a character like Ophelia vulnerable to institutionalized patriarchy loses the chance to hold a significant place within the central tragedy.

Many critics have analyzed her madness, especially after Freudian approaches to literature emerged. Psychoanalytic interpretations often focus on her repressed sexuality and the tension between societal expectations and personal desire. James Marino, in 'Ophelia's Desire', examines her through Freudian psychoanalysis:

> "Ophelia is not a biological person but a stage type, she can be presumed to possess a stereotyped set of desires, drives, and erotic preferences… Ophelia makes only one clear decision in Hamlet, the decision to obey her father and deny her own desires, but that decision is radical and ultimately disastrous. Ophelia's sacrifice of her erotic drive marks her as entirely out of the ordinary… Her refusal of her desires is her character, just as Hamlet's delay of his revenge is his." (Marino, 2017)

Taking insights from such critics, Ophelia's madness and suicide can be seen as the result of a lost identity, suppressed desires, and societal oppression. Lacan even suggests that her madness might be a form of resistance a subtle critique of the world that drove her to take her own life. Ophelia becomes a symbol of stillness in the storm, a woman whose suppressed emotions erupt only in her final act her choice to leave the world. With no one to truly comfort her after Hamlet's rejection and her father's murder, she finds herself completely alone. Even Queen Gertrude, who shows sorrow for her, had earlier been part of the manipulations against her. When Laertes returns, Ophelia already senses the danger surrounding him as he confronts both Claudius and Hamlet. With no safe place left, whether deliberate or the result of madness, Ophelia's death can be read as an ambiguous act of defiance against the forces that oppressed her.

Evadne: The Bride of Blood and Silence

Evadne, a central figure in Beaumont and Fletcher's 'The Maid's Tragedy' (1611), embodies the Jacobean era's complex dynamics of sexual manipulation and patriarchal power within the royal court. The plot unfolds around Evadne, a beautiful young woman coerced into becoming the mistress of the morally corrupt King of Rhodes before her marriage to Amintor. The king forces Amintor to marry Evadne to preserve his own relationship with her. On their wedding night, Evadne reveals her status as the king's mistress and refuses to consummate the marriage, provoking Amintor's outrage. Despite feeling powerless, Amintor pretends to be her husband, only to later learn from the king that Evadne must visit him at will. The ensuing narrative explores themes of love, betrayal, revenge, and political power.

Evadne's brother vows revenge on the king for exploiting his sister. Following a moral awakening, Evadne experiences guilt and resolves to kill the king herself. After fulfilling her revenge, she begs Amintor to accept her as wife; he rejects her, prompting her suicide. Amintor, wounded during a duel with Aspatia who was disguised and loved him—kills himself upon recognizing her identity. Melantius, Evadne's brother, also dies by suicide. Except for the king's murder, the other characters meet tragic ends through self-inflicted death.

Throughout the drama, Evadne undergoes a profound transformation from a self-absorbed mistress to a tragic figure propelled by revenge. Her intelligence and charisma are emphasized, as reflected in Melantius's description: "Ay, Evadne, / Thou art young and handsome, / A lady of sweet complexion…" (Beaumont, 1717: 60). Initially, she appears vulnerable, deceived by the king, enduring silent torment—what may be termed "Stillness in the storm"—largely unaware of her plight. Forced into a duplicitous marriage, she feels trapped. When she implores Amintor to kill the king, his hesitation reveals the era's entrenched male dominance:

"The King there lies a terror: what frail man

Dares lift his hand against it? Let the gods

Speak to him when they please: till when, let us

Suffer and wait." (Beaumont, 1717: 31)

Here, Evadne exposes the king's oppressive agenda, highlighting patriarchal supremacy. When Amintor questions her secret, Evadne confesses to a potential pregnancy from the king and claims marriage as a means to preserve her honor:

"I must have one

To father children, and to bear the name

Of husband to me, that my sin may be

More honourable!" (Beaumont, 1717: 32)

This declaration underscores her victimization and the societal pressures to maintain appearances. Amintor, however, shows no empathy, expressing a desire to die by her hand due to his anguish. Evadne's silent suffering and emotional control reveal her internalization of repression within a patriarchal system.vCorporal notes that Amintor's rejection closes off Evadne's avenues for redemption: "Amintor's negative response to his wife's murder of the king in 'The Maid's Tragedy' suggests that Evadne is denied the possibility to transcend her sins" (Corporaal, 2003). Thus, Evadne's burgeoning female consciousness, her quest for self-dignity and agency; compels her to act independently, embodying her moral resolve by killing the king herself.

This transformation is catalyzed by Melantius, who appeals to Evadne's sense of shame and dishonor, urging her to join his revenge. He embodies the patriarchal imperative for atonement: "If the gods grant thee any, purge thy sickness." Melantius's willingness to kill the king contrasts with Evadne's initial passivity and propels her awakening. Their dialogue reveals her self-reproach and moral conflict:

"…there is not in the compass of the light

For I have done those follies, those mad mischiefs,

Would dare a woman. Oh my loaden soul,

Be not so cruel to me; choke not up

The way to my repentance." (Beaumont, 1717: 65)

Evadne's evolution culminates in a ferocious repudiation of her former self as she confronts the king before his death:

"I am not she; nor bear I in this breast

So much cold spirit to be called a woman

I am a tiger; I am anything

That knows not pity. Stir not; if thou dost

I'll take thee unprepared, thy fears upon thee,

That make thy sin look double, and so send thee

(By my revenge, I will!) to look those torments

Prepared for such black souls." (Beaumont, 1717: 82)

Here, she embraces a symbolic "masculinized" identity to exercise power denied to her as a woman. When patriarchal protectors fail her, she seizes justice through violence. Yet, Amintor's rejection following her act of vengeance precipitates her emotional collapse. Corporaal further observes: "At this stage Evadne has also lost the quality to control the representations of herself. She is unable to offer an alternative meaning of herself in opposition to Amintor's condemnations, and to convince him that his view of her is wrong" (Corporaal, 2003). Isolated by both male authority figures, including her brother who withdraws support, Evadne's despair leads her to suicide with the same knife used to kill the king.

Katherine Graham, drawing on Traub's analysis, interprets Evadne's self-description as a "monster" as emblematic of her challenge to patriarchal norms: ". . . who describes herself as 'a monster' in a scene that indicates her prior sexual excess and her challenge to patriarchy, where her act of stabbing the king evokes a usurpation of patriarchal rights to penetration" (Graham, 2018). Evadne's defiance resonates with Shakespeare's Tamora in 'Titus Andronicus', who also pursues vengeance to reclaim agency. While Evadne's death may serve dramatic closure, it highlights the persistence of moral condemnation, with Amintor symbolizing societal rejection due to her sexual "impurity." Graham further employs queer theory to interrogate the gendered implications of revenge: "If critical interpretations position the revenger as disconnected from the moral, economic, judicial, and temporal codes that regulate others in their sociocultural environment, it is logical that the act of revenge might also disrupt the gendered identity of the revenger" (Graham, 2018). Evadne's narrative thus offers fertile ground for analyzing the destabilization of prescribed gender roles through the act of vengeance.

In 'The Maid's Tragedy', Evadne embodies the contradictions and constraints imposed on women in Jacobean society. Her trajectory from coerced mistress, silent sufferer, and agent of violent retribution to isolated suicide reveals the gendered tensions within early modern patriarchal structures. Her story invites ongoing feminist and psychoanalytic inquiry into female agency, emotional restraint, and the symbolic costs of transgressing established social codes.

The Guided Cage of Bianca

Thomas Middleton's 'Women Beware Women' (1612–1627) offers a penetrating critique of early modern patriarchal society, where women are ensnared in sexual manipulation, often oblivious to the devastating consequences. The narrative centers on Bianca, a wealthy heiress who elopes with Leantio, a man of lower status. Leantio, driven by insecurity and possessiveness, confines Bianca with his mother's aid, shielding her from the town's gaze but effectively imprisoning her. Bianca soon becomes the object of desire for the Duke of Florence, who, with Livia's complicity, orchestrates a calculated seduction resembling a game of chess, leveraging wealth and influence to ensnare her.

Leantio, upon discovering Bianca's vulnerability, betrays her by pursuing an affair with Livia. He cruelly flaunts this liaison to provoke Bianca's jealousy, compounding her emotional torment. In response, Bianca conspires with the Duke to orchestrate Leantio's murder and subsequently marries the Duke, despite opposition from his younger brother, the Cardinal. Livia further entangles Bianca and Isabella in a web of deceit, misleading Isabella into an incestuous relationship with Hippolito, her supposed uncle; resulting in pregnancy. The play's climax sees a masque in which Livia, avenging Leantio's death, kills Isabella, only to succumb herself to a fatal poisoning intended for the Duke's brother, the Cardinal. Bianca's attempt to poison the Cardinal inadvertently leads to the Duke's death, and overcome by despair, Bianca consumes the remaining poison, sealing her tragic fate.

Bianca's vulnerability must be understood against the backdrop of a male-dominated society where women's bodies and desires are commodified and controlled. The Duke exploits his power to seduce women, employing wealth, coercion, and flattery to bend them to his will. His manipulation of Livia to make Bianca accessible reflects this predatory system. In his enticement, the Duke flatters Bianca with promises of fortune and glory:

"But I give better in exchange; wealth, honour.

She that is fortunate in a duke's favour

Lights on a tree that bears all women's wishes

If your own mother saw you pluck fruits there,

She would commend your wit and praise the time

Of your naivity. Take hold of glory." (Middleton, 84)

Though he eventually marries Bianca, the Duke's union is contested by his brother, the Cardinal, who acts as the voice of religious morality. The Cardinal opposes the marriage due to its adulterous origins, warning:

"Cease, Cease! Religious honours done to sin /

disparage virtue's reverence, and will pull /

Heavens thunder upon Florence." (Middleton, 154)

He implores his brother to repent, chastising the Duke for seeking sanctuary in marriage after a sinful theft:

"He that taught you that craft,

Call him not master long, he will undo you

Grow not too cunning for your soul, good brother;

It is enough to use adulterous thefts

And then take sanctuary in marriage?" (Middleton, 155)

The Cardinal's invocation of religious authority exposes tensions between moral law and human desire, reinforcing patriarchal control cloaked in piety.

Leantio's character embodies the insecurity and possessiveness fueling the patriarchal cage around Bianca. Forced to marry against her parents' will, he imprisons her emotionally and physically. Upon learning of Bianca's infidelity, he seeks to humiliate her by flaunting his relationship with Livia, heightening her distress. Hippolito's incestuous involvement with Isabella, along with his opposition to Livia's marriage to Leantio, further illustrates the selective enforcement of patriarchal norms, privileging male desire while condemning female sexuality.

Bianca's defiance emerges as a reaction to these constraints and betrayals. Her rebellion is not merely personal but a challenge to the rigid social order that confines her. When Cardinal warns the Duke, Bianca vocally resists:

"…Heaven and angels

Take great delight in a converted sinner;

Why should you then, a servent or professor,

Differ so much from them?

…

Pray, whether its religion better served

When lives that are licentious are made honest

Than when they still run through a sinful blood?

'Tis nothing virtue's temples to deface,

But built the ruins, there's a work of grace." (Middleton, 156)

Bianca's speech critiques religious institutions that enforce moral strictures yet claim divine grace for repentance, challenging the legitimacy of male authority over female sexuality. Her rhetoric reveals an emerging consciousness that rejects man-made moral codes and asserts the possibility of redemption beyond patriarchal judgment.

The play's male figures, Duke, Leantio, Hippolito, and Cardinal embody facets of patriarchal dominance, prioritizing control and reputation over women's autonomy or well-being. Their actions reveal a systemic entrapment of women in a "patriarchal maze," where adultery, incest, and betrayal serve as symptoms of broader social dysfunction. Kate Millet's seminal work 'Sexual Politics' offers a useful lens to interpret Bianca's predicament: "Patriarchy has god on her side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrine as to nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality" (Millet, 51). Bianca's surveillance and blame stem not only from her actions but from deeply embedded cultural codes that conflate female sexuality with moral danger. Her rebellion, then, embodies a struggle against a system that wields religion and social norms as instruments of female subjugation.

A parallel female figure appears in the Jacobean play 'The Changeling' (1622) by Middleton and Rowley. In a subplot, Isabella, a young wife guarded from suitors by Lollio, becomes victim to seduction and extortion. The play highlights invasive patriarchal practices; such as virginity and pregnancy tests and exposes the systemic policing of female bodies. The main plot's Beatrice-Joanna similarly faces manipulation and threats, highlighting the precarious position of women. Both Bianca and Isabella endure confinement by insecure men, while their male counterparts such as the Duke and Antonia exemplify the patriarchal mindset privileging male desire and control. Unlike Bianca, Isabella undergoes a symbolic death, embodying emotional restraint and striving to correct her husband's wrongs within a system designed to silence female agency. Together, these plays reveal the persistent gendered constraints of early modern society, wherein women's bodies and desires are battlegrounds for patriarchal power.

Calantha: The Queen who danced to Death

John Ford's 'The Broken Heart' (1633) set in ancient Sparta, resonates with an English audience through its enduring themes of love, loss, and social expectation. At its core, the play critiques forced marriages against the will of women, showing how such unions result in disaster and suffering. The plot begins when Crotolon and Thrasus decide to end their rivalry through the marriage of their children, Orgilus and Penthea. After Thrasus' death, his son Ithocles forces his sister Penthea to marry his friend Bassanes, disregarding her wishes. This betrayal sets in motion Orgilus' plan for revenge against Ithocles.

Bassanes resembles Leantio from 'Women Beware Women' and Alibius from 'The Changeling': all three are marked by jealousy and insecurity, fearing their wives' infidelity. In each case, this insecurity leads to confinement or surveillance of the wife, keeping her away from "adventurous men." The play's atmosphere reflects a male-dominated world where decisions go unchallenged, reinforcing a controlling attitude toward women. Bassanes, true to type, employs widows on the street and his spy Graus to monitor Penthea, suspects her of an affair with Orgilus, and even imagines an incestuous relationship between her and Ithocles. Orgilus' early description of Bassanes captures his oppressive nature:

"Beauteous Princess wedded to this torture

By an intuiting brother, being secretly

Compelled to yield her virgine-freedom up

To him, who never can usurp her heart." (Ford, Act I, Scene I)

Orgilus calls Bassanes a "monster" for his tyrannical treatment of Penthea. Yet Orgilus himself mirrors patriarchal hypocrisy. While he still loves Penthea and seeks to see her secretly, he demands that his sister Euphranea marry only with his permission. Upon discovering her relationship with Prophilus, a friend of Ithocles, he denounces her dishonesty. His possessive language reveals his male ego:

"She is mine own, and may not be disposed

But with my liking; yet she shall be thine

And only thine, if I may claim a brother's

Interest in her affection."

Here, Orgilus claims control over his sister in the same way he condemns in Bassanes. Eventually, he relents and allows Euphranea's marriage, but feminist criticism notes his double standard: while condemning Bassanes' control over Penthea, he himself tries to dictate his sister's marital fate. Nevertheless, Orgilus' love for Penthea is sincere. In Act I, Scene I, he reflects:

"My love is honourable… she was mine

To my purposed; chastly honourable."

Unlike Bassanes' possessive suspicion, Orgilus' attachment is bound with loyalty; his self-imposed exile is intended to protect Penthea. Ithocles, meanwhile, enforces his sister's loveless marriage while pursuing his own desire for Princess Calantha. Like other male figures in the play, he embodies the conservative, patriarchal pattern of moral policing for women but moral flexibility for men.

The women of 'The Broken Heart' Penthea, Calantha, and Euphranea endure suffering under these structures. Euphranea submits to her brother's will yet covertly follows her heart, eventually marrying with his consent. Penthea, however, is fragile and unable to defy Ithocles' command. In a secret meeting with Orgilus, she likens her marriage to marital rape, describing her utter lack of escape:

"My lord, my brother, yet my lord… I must

Confess I am your servant, but—oh, my grief!—

You have forgotten, sir, how you then forced

Me from Orgilus, my plighted husband,

To wed Bassanes, a stranger to my love." (Ford, Act III, Scene V)

Penthea blames Ithocles for her misery. Though he later regrets his decision, her mental state deteriorates under sustained emotional abuse. She starves herself to death, an act Jessica Dyson interprets as a symbolic "marriage in death": "Orgilus is only able to raise his bride's veil in death, thus paralleling the marriage of Ithocles and Calantha. Both on-stage images of marriage in death highlight the metaphorical death in marriage that really kills Penthea." (Dyson, 2015: 4) Ithocles' hypocrisy lies in treating his sister's marriage as a political arrangement, devoid of her consent, while pursuing Calantha with ideals of mutual love. Penthea's despair stems from being caught between parental decisions and fraternal authority, a condition Dyson summarises as: "The desires of the patriarch force Penthea into an untenable position." (Dyson, 2015: 9)

Calantha, in contrast, is enigmatic. She maintains an emotional stillness throughout much of the play. Although initially unmoved when told of Ithocles' love, she betrays subtle signs of affection. When Nearchus, the Prince of Argos, seeks her hand, she pointedly tosses her ring to Ithocles, a gesture

noted by him and confirmed by Nearchus in an aside. Using the occasion of Euphranea and Prophilus' wedding, she requests Ithocles' hand and receives her father's approval.

However, events under "The Masque" bring tragedy in rapid succession: news of Penthea's death, the king's passing, and finally Ithocles' murder by Orgilus. Calantha;s reaction all these three news could be seen when each time she changes the dance partner and asked for some changed intense music. Her reaction though seemed measured but her words show her inner turmoil:

"How dull this music sound? Strike up more sprightly

Our footings are not active like our heart

Which treads the nimbler measure." (Ford, Act V scene II)

Calantha is acutely aware of the circulating rumours concerning the murderer of Ithocles, rumours that are soon confirmed by Orgilus himself. With composed authority, she orders Orgilus's execution and, almost immediately thereafter, appoints Nearchus as ruler. In a final act of personal devotion, she ceremonially weds the corpse of Ithocles before succumbing herself, thus fulfilling the prophecy of her "broken heart." Her composure in the face of such profound losses does not indicate emotional detachment, but rather a disciplined mastery of feeling, embodying the royal ideal that "if monarchs are unable to govern their own emotions and passions successfully, they are not fit to govern a country." As Dyson observes, "It is possible that in Penthea's self-imposed starvation because of her conflicting emotions, and in Calantha's marrying Ithocles' corpse and dying of a broken heart, the play suggests this is true" (Dyson, 2015, pp. 14–15). Calantha's public death functions simultaneously as a calculated political gesture and as an intimate act of emotional release:

"Since my last kiss on thy cold lips, my lord

I seal thee mine in death; here's my last breath." (Ford, Act V, Scene III)

By dying in public, Calantha asserts her autonomy in the only way available choosing the moment and manner of her death after fulfilling her duty. She endures the loss of all intimate ties while projecting the stoicism expected of a ruler. Dyson frames this within the Caroline political context: "In the Caroline context, forced obedience and the tyranny of patriarchal monarchy lacks the reason and equity of the law, and is incompatible with the tenets of Neo-Platonism espoused by the Queen, and the chastity of the court promulgated by the King." (Dyson, 2015: 19)

Ultimately, 'The Broken Heart' is less a romantic tragedy than a political one, where personal relationships are subjugated to patriarchal authority. The play's men enforce moral restrictions on women while violating those ideals themselves, and the women whether through starvation, emotional suppression, or self-willed death resist in the only forms left to them. Penthea's decline and Calantha's stillness are not passive suffering but deliberate, if tragic, acts of agency within a system that allows no other path.

The Confluence of the Four Personae

Across four plays spanning the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline stages, four women—Ophelia ('Hamlet'), Evadne ('The Maid's Tragedy'), Bianca ('Women Beware Women'), and Calantha ('The Broken Heart'); embody a strikingly recurrent dramaturgical pattern. Early modern patriarchy converts their inner lives into 'stillness': a carefully managed surface of composure, silence, or stylised "madness" that functions as both a survival strategy and a form of symbolic death. This stillness is not a natural passivity but an imposed state, born of hostile cultural norms that prize the containment of female feeling over its expression. When read sequentially across forty years of dramatic production, these women trace the shifting mechanisms through which male authority transforms restraint into both protection and erasure.

"Ophelia's so-called "madness" after Polonius's death is less a symptom of fragile psychology than the final stage in a long process of social erasure. Before her breakdown, she is treated as a pliable resource by all the men who orbit her; her father, brother, lover, and the royal couple, each shaping her speech, body, and conduct to serve political ends. This cumulative silencing leaves her with no unmediated selfhood; she is never permitted to inhabit her own desires or her own grief. The only moment she appears self-possessed is in her songs and symbolic gestures during her mad scenes, semiotic acts outside rational discourse, hinting at truths the male court cannot hear. Her drowning, whether accidental or self-inflicted, becomes the ultimate metaphor: the stillness of water as the sole communicative space left to her, its surface an emblem of a life submerged by social control.

"Evadne" enters from a different dramatic angle but within a parallel architecture of coercion. Bound in a sham marriage to Amintor while being the King's mistress, her body becomes a political transaction in which her sexual autonomy is not merely stolen but formally reassigned. Initially complicit, her awakening is less romantic than political: she sees the structural trap and chooses to act. Yet her only available language of resistance is extreme violence; killing the King in a move that is both reclamation of self and destruction of the very order she inhabits. Her defiance is, paradoxically, inseparable from the codes she opposes; in an honor economy that measures women by their sexual history, her act guarantees social exile. Amintor's rejection confirms that in this world, visible female agency is intolerable. Facing inevitable alienation, Evadne turns her violence inward, ending her life; a final stillness that testifies to the catastrophic price of defying patriarchal choreography.

"Bianca", in 'Women Beware Women', endures a less overtly spectacular but no less destructive arc. Her trajectory mirrors Evadne's in the sense that she, too, is manoeuvred into sexual servitude, here by a Duke who uses charm and circumstance rather than overt force. Bianca's seeming self-advancement is never entirely her own; her choices are shaped by an environment that defines female worth almost exclusively through sexual reputation. Once raped and repositioned as a mistress, she inhabits a form of living death, her personhood reduced to her utility in a male network of desire and prestige. Unlike Evadne, she does not stage her rage in public violence; her suicide operates as a quiet refusal, a self-orchestrated erasure that denies the men around her the satisfaction of continued possession. Her death is both an exit and an indictment, a muted rebellion that resists spectacle.

"Calantha"'s case diverges in that she is a sovereign heir rather than a dependent woman, yet Ford uses her to explore the same politics of emotional containment. Her public role demands an almost ceremonial detachment, which she maintains even through personal catastrophe; the death of her betrothed. Calantha's composure is celebrated as queenly virtue, but Ford's dramaturgy exposes its cost: to uphold the stability of the realm, she must bury her emotions beneath ritual, deferring private grief until it consumes her internally. Unlike Ophelia's involuntary stillness or Evadne's violent refusal, Calantha's restraint is a deliberate aesthetic, a performance of endurance that the audience is invited to admire. Yet in the end, it too culminates in death; her body finally collapsing under the weight of the feelings it has been trained to conceal. Ford's tragic irony is that this celebrated steadiness is itself a slow self-annihilation.

Conclusion

Across these characters, stillness emerges as a gendered mechanism of governance: it transforms women into symbols whose value lies in their ability to suppress personal will for the stability of male-dominated structures. In Ophelia, it is enforced absence; in Evadne, a refusal that destroys itself; in Bianca, a quiet withdrawal from the stage of exploitation; in Calantha, a regal performance of endurance that masks internal ruin. The variations reflect the shifting theatrical and political climates of their respective eras, yet the underlying mechanics remain constant: women's emotional expression is either silenced, pathologized, commodified, or ritualised, until its only permissible form is symbolic death.

In all four, the female body becomes the primary stage on which social anxieties are played out, whether submerged in water, wielding a dagger, silently exiting, or standing immobile in royal poise. The emotional restraint demanded of these women is not merely personal discipline but a public performance, calibrated to uphold systems that cannot accommodate their full humanity. By charting these characters together, we see that early modern drama does not simply reflect patriarchal norms, it stages, codifies, and critiques the ways in which those norms turn living women into icons of stillness, their inner storms rendered theatrically invisible until they erupt into the finality of death.

The four playwrights: William Shakespeare, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Thomas Middleton, and John Ford; though working in different decades and political climates, share an interest in dramatizing the collision between female subjectivity and the structures of patriarchal power, yet each articulates it through a distinct dramaturgical motif. Shakespeare's tragedies often locate the female crisis in the intersection of private emotion and public consequence, using poetic fragmentation, as in Ophelia's songs, to signal a psyche unmoored by systemic silencing. Beaumont and Fletcher, attuned to courtly intrigue, frame Evadne's body as a site of political transaction, deploying the motif of "honour" to expose how female autonomy must be wrested from the very codes that deny it. Middleton's city tragedy treats sexual corruption less as a single act than as an embedded social economy, making Bianca's fate a commentary on how reputation operates as a commodity in urban life. Ford, in the Caroline period, intensifies the motif of emotional control into an aesthetic of restraint, where Calantha's composure becomes both the symbol and the instrument of sovereign authority, even as it erases her interior life. Together, these dramatists employ varying narrative strategies poetic disintegration, political betrayal, urban commodification, and ritualised stoicism to interrogate how early modern culture reshapes female feeling into the theatrical spectacle of 'stillness'.

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