

## GENDER ROLES THROUGH THE LENS OF PROVERBS: “A WOMAN’S TONGUE IS A WOMAN’S SWORD” IN SHAKESPEARE’S TRAGEDIES

**Nargiza Kabilovna Abbasova**

PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor,  
Head of the Department of Practical English Course, Fergana State University.

[abbasovanargiza@gmail.com](mailto:abbasovanargiza@gmail.com)

**Mushtariybegim Abduvaliyeva**

Master’s Degree Holder, Fergana State University

[m.abdurakhmanova7@gmail.com](mailto:m.abdurakhmanova7@gmail.com)

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**Abstract.** This article studies the manifestation of traditional gender stereotypes through proverbs in William Shakespeare’s major tragedies, with particular focus on the English proverb “A woman’s tongue is a woman’s sword.” Through textual analysis of “Hamlet”, “Othello”, “King Lear”, and “Macbeth”, this research explores how Shakespeare both reinforces and subverts conventional gender roles related to female speech and agency. The analysis reveals that while Shakespeare’s female characters often embody the proverb’s implications—using verbal prowess as their primary form of power—they simultaneously transcend traditional boundaries, demonstrating complex agency that challenges patriarchal expectations. The findings contribute to understanding how literary works both reflect and reshape cultural attitudes toward gender and communication.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, gender roles, proverbs, female agency, tragedy, Renaissance literature, discourse analysis.

## ГЕНДЕРНЫЕ РОЛИ В ЗЕРКАЛЕ ПОСЛОВИЦ: “A WOMAN’S TONGUE IS A WOMAN’S SWORD”

**Аннотация.** Данная статья изучает проявление традиционных гендерных стереотипов через пословицы в основных трагедиях Уильяма Шекспира, особое внимание уделяя английской пословице “Язык женщины - меч женщины”. Посредством текстуального анализа произведений “Гамлет”, “Отелло”, “Король Лир” и “Макбет” исследование изучает, как Шекспир одновременно укрепляет и разрушает традиционные гендерные роли, связанные с женской речью и деятельностью. Анализ показывает, что хотя женские персонажи Шекспира часто воплощают смысл пословицы - используя словесное мастерство как основную форму власти - они одновременно выходят за традиционные границы, демонстрируя сложную деятельность, которая бросает вызов патриархальным ожиданиям.

**Ключевые слова:** Шекспир, гендерные роли, пословицы, женская активность, трагедии, литература эпохи Возрождения, дискурс-анализ

## MAQOLLAR ORQALI GENDER ROLLAR: SHEKSPIR FOJIALARIDA “AYOLNING TILI - AYOLNING QILICHI”

**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu maqola Uilyam Shekspirning asosiy fojialarida an’anaviy gender stereotiplari maqollar orqali namoyon bo’lishini o’rganadi, ayniqsa “Ayolning tili - ayolning qilichi” ingliz maqoliga e’tibor qaratadi.

*“Hamlet”, “Otello”, “Qiroi Lir” va “Makbet” asarlarining matniy tahlili orqali tadqiqot Shekspirning ayol nutqi va faolligiga oid an’anaviy gender rollarini qanday mustahkamlashi va buzishini ko’rsatadi. Tahlil shuni ko’rsatadiki, Shekspirning ayol qahramonlari ko’pincha maqolning ma’nosini namoyon etishsa-da – og’zaki mahoratni asosiy kuch sifatida ishlatishsa-da, ular ayni paytda an’anaviy chegaralardan oshib, patriarkhal kutishlarni shubha ostiga qo’yadigan murakkab faollikni namoyish etadilar.*

**Kalit so’zlar:** *Shekspir, gender rollari, maqollar, ayol faolligi, fojialar, Uyg’onish davri adabiyoti, diskurs tahlili.*

## INTRODUCTION

The proverb “A woman’s tongue is a woman’s sword” encapsulates centuries of cultural attitudes toward female speech, suggesting both the power and the perceived danger of women’s verbal expression. This saying, prevalent in Early Modern England, reflects a society that simultaneously acknowledged women’s rhetorical capabilities while constraining their social roles. William Shakespeare, writing during this period, created female characters whose speech patterns and verbal agency provide a complex lens through which to examine gender dynamics in Renaissance society.

Shakespeare’s tragedies, composed between 1600-1608, present a particularly rich field for examining how traditional gender expectations intersect with dramatic necessity and character development. Unlike comedies, where gender play often serves comedic purposes, or histories, where political concerns predominate, tragedies allow for deeper exploration of psychological and social tensions. The tragic form demands that characters possess agency sufficient to drive dramatic action, creating an inherent tension when applied to female characters in a patriarchal society that typically limited women’s public voice.

This article aims to analyze how Shakespeare’s tragic heroines embody, challenge, and ultimately transcend the limitations suggested by traditional proverbs about women’s speech. By examining specific instances where female characters use language as a form of power—their “sword”—we can better understand both Shakespeare’s artistic choices and the broader cultural negotiations surrounding gender and communication in Early Modern England.

The research question guiding this analysis is: How do Shakespeare’s tragic female characters both fulfill and subvert the expectations embedded in the proverb “A woman’s tongue is a woman’s sword,” and what does this reveal about evolving concepts of female agency in Renaissance drama?

## METHODS

This article employs close textual analysis combined with historical contextualization to examine four major Shakespearean tragedies: “Hamlet” (1600-1601), “Othello” (1603), “King Lear” (1605-1606), and “Macbeth” (1606). The methodology incorporates several analytical approaches:

- **Textual Analysis:** Systematic examination of speeches by major female characters (Gertrude, Ophelia, Desdemona, Emilia, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Lady Macbeth) to identify patterns of linguistic power, manipulation, resistance, and agency.

Particular attention is paid to moments where these characters use speech to influence action, reveal truth, or challenge authority.

- Discourse Analysis: Investigation of how these characters' speech acts function within the dramatic context, examining not only what they say but how their words are received, interpreted, and acted upon by other characters.

- Historical Contextualization: Integration of contemporary sources on gender roles, including conduct books, sermons, and other literary works, to understand the cultural framework within which Shakespeare was writing and his original audiences were interpreting.

- Proverb Studies Approach: Analysis of how the selected proverb functions as both a constraining ideology and a source of empowerment, examining instances where characters' verbal "swords" cut both ways—serving their interests while potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes about women's speech.

The analysis focuses on key scenes where female characters' speech acts drive plot development, reveal character depth, or challenge social expectations, providing a comprehensive view of how Shakespeare navigated contemporary gender ideologies while creating dramatically compelling characters.

## RESULTS

Analysis of Shakespeare's tragic heroines reveals a complex relationship with the proverb "A woman's tongue is a woman's sword." These characters consistently demonstrate that verbal prowess serves as their primary form of agency, yet this power comes with significant costs and limitations.

Lady Macbeth exemplifies the proverb's dual nature most clearly. Her famous manipulation of Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 7 demonstrates the "sword-like" power of female rhetoric: "*Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? / And wakes it now to look so green and pale / At what it did so freely?*" Her words cut through Macbeth's hesitation with surgical precision, questioning his masculinity and honor. Yet this verbal victory ultimately leads to her psychological destruction, suggesting that wielding the "tongue as sword" exacts a heavy toll.

Goneril and Regan in "King Lear" similarly use speech as weapons, but their rhetorical skills serve both empowerment and destruction. Their opening speeches in the love test demonstrate masterful manipulation: Goneril declares she loves her father "*more than words can wield the matter,*" while Regan claims her happiness is "made of" her father's love. These performances secure them political power but also establish them as duplicitous, setting up their eventual downfall.

Several female characters use their "verbal swords" not for manipulation but for truth-telling, which proves equally dangerous. "Cordelia's" refusal to participate in Lear's love test - "*I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less*"—represents a different wielding of the tongue as sword. Her honesty cuts through the ceremony's artifice but results in immediate banishment.

Emilia in "Othello" provides perhaps the most powerful example of truth as a verbal weapon.

Her revelation of Iago's machinations in Act 5 demonstrates how a woman's tongue can indeed serve as a sword of justice: *"And your reports have set the murder on."* Her speech literally cuts through the web of deception that has driven the tragedy, though it costs her life.

The analysis reveals consistent patterns in how these verbal "swords" operate within patriarchal constraints. "Desdemona's" eloquent defense before the senate in "Othello" shows sophisticated rhetorical skill - *"That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world"*—yet her subsequent tragedy stems partly from her inability to make Othello truly hear her words when they matter most.

Ophelia's madness scenes in "Hamlet" present a particularly complex case. Her fragmented songs and speeches could be seen as her tongue finally becoming a true sword, cutting through court politeness to reveal uncomfortable truths about sexuality and corruption. Yet this power comes only through the loss of reason, suggesting the impossibility of direct female speech within the play's social framework.

The female characters employ various rhetorical strategies that reflect their understanding of how to wield verbal power effectively:

1. Indirection: Characters like Gertrude often speak in ways that allow multiple interpretations, protecting themselves while still exercising influence.
2. Emotional Appeal: Lady Macbeth's manipulation relies heavily on emotional rather than logical argumentation, playing into expectations about feminine discourse while achieving masculine political goals.
3. Performance of Femininity: Goneril and Regan's initial speeches perform expected feminine submission while actually securing power, showing how the "sword" can be disguised as traditional feminine compliance.

### DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that Shakespeare's treatment of the proverb "A woman's tongue is a woman's sword" is far more nuanced than simple reinforcement or rejection of gender stereotypes. Instead, his tragic heroines embody the complex realities of female agency within patriarchal structures, where verbal prowess becomes both a source of power and a potential liability.

Shakespeare's approach reflects the tension between dramatic necessity and social expectations. Tragedy requires characters with sufficient agency to drive plot development, yet Early Modern gender ideologies severely constrained women's acceptable forms of power. By making their "tongues" their "swords," Shakespeare created female characters who could meaningfully participate in tragic action while remaining within culturally recognizable frameworks. This strategy allowed contemporary audiences to accept powerful female characters by framing their influence through familiar proverbs and expectations. The notion that women naturally possessed verbal skills—often viewed suspiciously as potential for deception or manipulation—provided a culturally sanctioned pathway for female dramatic agency.

However, the analysis also reveals the consistent costs associated with female characters wielding their verbal "swords." Lady Macbeth's psychological collapse, Cordelia's banishment, Emilia's death, and Ophelia's madness all suggest that while women may possess this form of power, exercising it often proves destructive within the plays' social frameworks.

This pattern reflects broader cultural anxieties about female speech. The proverb itself contains this ambivalence—acknowledging women’s verbal power while implicitly warning about its dangerous potential. Shakespeare’s tragic outcomes for verbally powerful women both validate and complicate these cultural concerns.

Despite these tragic outcomes, Shakespeare’s detailed psychological portrayals of his female characters work to humanize and complicate stereotypes about women’s speech. Characters like Emilia and Cordelia use their verbal “swords” in service of truth and justice, challenging the assumption that female rhetorical power is inherently deceptive or self-serving.

Moreover, the plays often reveal the inadequacy of male listening rather than female speaking as the source of tragic misunderstanding. Othello’s inability to truly hear Desdemona, Lear’s preference for flattery over honesty, and Macbeth’s susceptibility to manipulation all suggest that the problem lies not with women’s tongues as swords, but with men’s failure to engage constructively with female speech.

These Shakespearean negotiations with gender and speech remain remarkably relevant to contemporary discussions about female communication styles, leadership, and authority. Modern research in sociolinguistics has documented how women’s speech continues to be evaluated differently from men’s, with assertive communication styles often labeled negatively when employed by women. The proverb’s metaphor of tongue as sword captures an enduring tension about female verbal power—simultaneously recognized as formidable and viewed with suspicion.

Shakespeare’s complex portrayal of this dynamic provides insights that transcend his historical moment, offering frameworks for understanding how individuals navigate gendered expectations about communication and authority.

### CONCLUSION

This analysis of gender roles through the proverb “A woman’s tongue is a woman’s sword” in Shakespeare’s tragedies reveals the playwright’s sophisticated engagement with Early Modern gender ideologies. Rather than simply reinforcing or rejecting contemporary stereotypes, Shakespeare created female characters whose verbal agency operates within, challenges, and ultimately transcends traditional constraints. The tragic heroines examined—Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Desdemona, Emilia, Gertrude, and Ophelia—demonstrate that women’s “tongues” can indeed serve as “swords,” but these weapons cut in multiple directions. They provide paths to agency and influence while also exposing their wielders to danger and destruction.

Shakespeare’s treatment suggests that the problem lies not with female verbal power itself, but with social structures that constrain its expression and male characters who fail to engage constructively with it. This insight remains relevant for contemporary discussions about gender, communication, and authority. The research contributes to scholarship on Renaissance literature, gender studies, and the cultural transmission of attitudes through literary representation. It demonstrates how proverbs function as both ideological constraints and sources of empowerment, and how skilled dramatists can use traditional frameworks to explore complex social dynamics.

Future research might extend this analysis to Shakespeare’s comedies and histories, examine similar patterns in the works of his contemporaries, or investigate how these themes have been interpreted in modern theatrical productions.

The intersection of proverbs, gender, and literary representation offers rich territory for continued scholarly exploration. By understanding how Shakespeare navigated these cultural negotiations, we gain insights not only into Early Modern gender dynamics but also into the enduring challenges of representing and understanding female agency across historical periods.

The “woman’s tongue” remains a powerful sword, and Shakespeare’s tragedies continue to illuminate both its potential and its perils.

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