Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies….(Antony and Cleopatra, 2.2. 245-8)

This dissertation examines the representation of women in selected plays of Shakespeare. It is seen that women play, or are made to play, roles ranging from the innocent to the complex and devious, to accommodate the needs of the text and of society. It shows that the naturalisation and universalization of the woman’s role in different societal positions cannot be seen in isolation from hidden patriarchal figurations. The Shakespearean text cannot avoid some of the socially acceptable practices in the presentation of women characters. However, the presentation of women in Shakespeare is neither a blatant exhibition of patriarchal ideology nor an uncritical celebration of its collapse. At crucial moments the Shakespearean text is ambivalent on the issue of patriarchy and even in the face of its apparent collapse. The ambivalence notwithstanding, what needs to be examined is why women in Shakespeare’s plays appear to enjoy textual and ideological space but are ultimately made to subscribe or submit to the patriarchal order.

Recent scholarship on Shakespeare has been increasingly drawn to the representation of gender in Shakespeare’s plays. Traditionally Shakespeare’s plays have been lauded for the depiction of witty and intelligent female characters in and out of love. During late 1970s and early 1980s critics motivated by the
feminist movements, began an examination of gender in the works of Shakespeare. An analysis of gender allows us to understand the variety of ways in which Shakespeare responded imaginatively to gender as a crucial determinant of human identity and political power. By gender we mean the division of male and female and the attribute considered appropriate to each—‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Gender exists primarily as construction of particular societies. Man or woman desire to be the same or opposite sex and this varies from culture to culture and changes historically. Masculinity is typically associated with sexual aggression in our time, whereas in Shakespeare’s time women were considered to be more lustful than men. The question of gender ensured that certain roles were determined for women in society by a particular ideology. Any transgression or refusal to adhere to a set pattern was seen as unnatural and deviant. Again interpretations of action and ideas were made along gendered terms. Certain types of behaviour or conduct including work and participation in the public world of power politics and social welfare were deemed as a masculine preserve and so out of bounds for women. Women who showed any interest in education, work (other than domestic) or public affairs were discouraged and even penalised. Their territory was restricted to the home and hearth.

Women characters play an important role for the dramatic run of events in Shakespeare’s plays. Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare’s dramas are also seen to be bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. To understand gender in Shakespeare’s life time is first to understand the patriarchal
household. In the late sixteenth century patriarchy meant the power of the father over everyone in the household, including servants and apprentices. Early culture was hierarchical, with women under the rule of men. Women were believed to be less rational than men and were deemed to need male protection and guidance. Single women were the property of their fathers and were handed over to their future husbands through marriage. In Elizabethan time, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience. All these virtues, of course, have their meaning in relationship to men. The role allocation in Elizabethan society was strictly regulated; men were the breadwinners and woman had to be obedient housewives and mothers. However, within this deprived, tight and organized scope, women are represented in most diverse ways in Shakespearean Drama. Women had few legal or economic rights and her identity was subsumed under her male protector. Women were made to accept their natural inferiority which was instilled into them mainly because of their financial insolvency: they had to depend on their fathers or guardians for support.

In order not to lose authority over women, men condemned women as shrews or scolds. A women’s social status was assessed by her economic position, chastity, and fidelity. But women of all social classes ventured out in public, like Shakespeare’s own theatre audience. Women also held productive
roles in the economy. However, Shakespeare limits his presentation of economic labour to that of household servants, tavern-keepers, bawds and prostitutes. Interestingly, Shakespeare’s London had a visible female presence: they could be seen assisting in household matters as well as buying and selling in the market, engaging in litigation on their own, and frequenting the playhouses. In Southwark the immediate vicinity of the theatres, some of the household were headed by women. While the projection of some energetic and somewhat emancipated women might have attracted a section of female theatre going public, the male spectators would have responded with anxious hostility to the representation of women’s power and autonomy.

Women in Shakespeare’s age appear to have had a good deal. While unmarried women seem to have had virtually all the rights of a man, it was impossible for a woman to remain unmarried and independent. Marriages were arranged to further the interest of power either in the form of land or the throne. On marriage the girl's legal rights ceased and she became a property of her husband. Some husbands broke with the medieval conventions and allowed their wives to take part in running a business or to join a Guild, but this did not give the wives any kind of legal independence. While they gained confidence and a greater sense of personal identity by being allowed out of the traditional sphere of the house, they were still seen as their husband’s chattel. If for some reasons it was impractical for a girl to marry, she was encouraged to enter a nunnery. On entry all her possessions were made over to the religious house and she lost all
secular rights. The only time a woman was likely to wield some influence was if her husband died and she was left in charge either of a business or of a family estate.

In the eyes of the law then a woman was only theoretically the equal of a man. But in practice, most women were never able to wield any significant legal and political power because they ‘belonged’ either to a man or to the Church. There was however a significant development on the demand for education for women which grew out of the principles and activities of the humanists. The humanists did not, however, see girls and boys as equal. Their concept of education was founded on the old medieval principle that women were the weaker sex. They believed that women were more frivolous and less stable than men. It was necessary, according to them, to have women educated in order to enable them to cope with their inherent deficiencies. The humanists are seen to be working towards intellectual not social ends. Nevertheless it became a fashion for the girls from rich bourgeois, as well aristocratic families to learn foreign languages and study the scriptures.

But throughout Shakespeare’s drama women can be seen pushing against the patriarchal strictures. A study of Shakespeare’s plays, especially the history plays and the plays otherwise dealing with power politics shows that the stage of English history or even the world of statecraft was deemed to be no place for women. For example in Richard II, when the Duchess of York goes to plead with the new king Henry IV, her conduct is presented as an indecorous intrusion.
Similarly Joan and Margaret (Henry VI) are demonised for their intrusion into the historical arenas of court and battlefield. The more active the female characters become the more negative is their characterisation. On the other hand helplessness seems to be an essential component of female virtue. The women are confined to enclosed domestic settings; they are kept away from the council chambers and battlefields. The picture becomes more complicated if we look beyond the prominent English History plays. King John, Henry VIII and the Henry VI plays, however, do include female characters who intervene in the historical action. In the opening scene of King John, Eleanor announces that she is a ‘soldier’ and both Eleanor and Constance play leading roles in the conflict for the English throne. In Richard III, too, women have more space and pose a theatrical challenge to Richard with his demonic energy.

Shakespeare’s plays address some of these troublesome areas in the representation of gender and the roles given to women characters. They also touch upon some of the key patriarchal assumptions concerning gender. The world of real politik is considered to be outside the province of women: the stage of history is no place for women. This view prevailed despite the reigns of Mary and then Elizabeth in England. Again martial valour is presented as a monstrous anomaly in women. In fact women are seen to be caught in a double bind in the Shakespearean play. Strong women like Goneril, Cleopatra and others are unchaste and unwomanly; virtuous women like Ophelia, Octavia and others are confined to playing roles of helpless tools or bystanders, powerless to affect the
course of history. Thus the female characters in Shakespeare are confronted with a dilemma: they can be either womanly or warlike. They can be virtuous or powerful, never both. This suggest that the construction (and constriction) of women’s roles was well under way in Shakespeare’s times and gender specific territory was being charted out, with a little resistance no doubt.

It was also very common back in Elizabethan England, to compel woman into marriages in order to receive power, legacy, dowry or land in exchange. Even though the Queen herself was an unmarried woman, the roles of woman in society were extremely restricted. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare’s plays reflects the Elizabethan image of woman in general. For all that, Shakespeare supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of genders, their roles and responsibilities in society; he also puts their representations into question, challenges, and also revises them.

Shakespeare’s characters, especially the major characters, realise their identities through political, domestic or psychological chaos. In most cases this chaos is represented as an inversion of gender hierarchy. Thus, social order is restored at the end of the plays through the platonic concept of marriage.

Any exploration of the roles of women in Shakespeare’s plays also brings into question the issues related to marriage. It can be said that marriage in Shakespeare’s plays is a crucial dramatic action and a focus for tension and also reconciliation between the sexes. According Carol Thomas Neely “Movements
towards marriage constitute the subject of the comedies; disrupted marriages are prominent in many of the tragedies; the establishment or reestablishment of marriage in one or two generations is the symbol of harmony in the late romances” (1).

Thus, it can be said that marriage is the social context that centrally defines the female characters in Shakespeare’s plays; with the few exceptions their conflict, crisis and character development occur in connection with wooing, weeding and marriage. Their roles and status are determined by their place in the paradigm of marriage – maiden/wife/widow-which likewise governed the lives of Renaissance women. The introduction to a Jacobean women’s legal handbook starkly notes the inevitability and restrictiveness of this paradigm for women: “All of them are understood either married or to be married and their desires are subjects to their husbands”. Even exceptional historical women like Queen Elizabeth or extraordinary characters do not escape definition in terms of the paradigm. Elizabeth made strategic use of the conventional role she eschewed, manipulating her marriageability to gain political advantage and presenting herself as the wife to England and mother to her people. Even Cleopatra creates for herself a symbolic marriage to Antony at the end of the play. Thus, a balanced evaluation of the powers and limits of the roles of women in Shakespeare’s plays, should also involve an examination of these women in the context of marriage.

Marriage is the locus of sexual anxiety in the play because it was the focus of multiple pressures in the culture in which Shakespeare lived and worked
Traditionally the state, the church, the family, the local community and the marriageable couple had powerful and conflicting designs on the institution of marriage. In Shakespeare’s England these conflicts were particularly acute because of the political tensions which accompanied the establishment of an independent Protestant state, the religious changes which attended the reformation and the creation of the Anglican Church, the influential programme of the humanist reformers, and the extensive theoretical controversy about the nature of women. This was possibly generated by the unsettling changes in the social roles. Attitudes towards the place of women, the nature of sexuality, and the function of marriage were contradictory and in flux in the Elizabethan period as they were in the plays. Therefore reading the social and literary representation of women in this era is a complicated one.

This is further complicated by the conflicting views on the status of women in the period. Traditionally Historians have assumed that the ferment over women, sexuality and marriage generated improvement in the status of men as well as that of women. These historians cite evidence of the presence of exemplary women in this period who achieved intellectual accomplishment (Mary Tudor, Elizabeth I, the Countess of Pembroke). Juliet Dusinberre believes that the humanist emphasis on education for women and the new ideology of companionate marriage propounded by the Protestants contributed to improved status of women in the period. On the other hand most contemporary scholars argue that the status of women relative to that of men and, to that of women in
earlier periods, diminished. These critics argue that the remarkable accomplishment of exemplary women were anomalous, manifested asymmetries, and generated anxieties among the men. Similarly, the education for women were less available, less serious, more problematic than that offered to men and there was a decline in women’s economic freedom. These critics are also of the view that companionate marriage in a patriarchal society demanded the increased subordination of women. These arguments reveal the paradox of Renaissance women.

Thus, it can be said that in the Elizabethan age women were more respected and hence more ‘free’ than they had ever been before. Women had a sufficient sense of their speech, their action, and their relationship. But the ‘self’ fashioned for a woman was still firmly Christian, based on submission and obedience in contrast to what was expected of a man. It can be argued that the strong interest in women showed by the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists reflect the unexpressed worry of the patriarchal world over the likelihood of social unwanted change being brought forth by women.

It is seen that patriarchal order takes different forms and is portrayed with varying degree of emphasis throughout the Shakespearean canon. In some comedies it weighs lightly: the power of the ruler can be evaded in the green world retreat or countered by activities of the heroines. Yet at the conclusion of the comedies these assertive heroines are muted as they declare or imply their submission to their husbands. Elsewhere patriarchy is more oppressive. Its lethal
flaws are made manifest in the presentation of rape and attempted rape, in the aggressive death dealing feud of Romeo and Juliet, in the spurious manliness and empty honor that generated the tragedy of Othello, in the militaristic and mercantile values of the Greeks in Troilus and Cressida and of the Romans in Antony and Cleopatra. Many other plays as well reveal the high cost of patriarchal values; the men who uphold them atrophy and the women, whether resistant or acquiescent, die. Although women may strive to resist or correct the perversions of patriarchy, they do not succeed in altering that order nor do they withdraw their allegiance from it. Cordelia in King Lear stands up to her father’s coercion out of love for him and leads an army on behalf of his “right”; She dies a victim of a chain of brutal assertions of manhood- Lear’s, Edmund’s, the captains. In King Lear and elsewhere the extent to which Shakespeare aligns himself with patriarchy, merely portrays it, or deliberately criticizes it remains a complex and open question, one that feminist criticism is aptly suited to address.

Shakespeare’s relation to the patriarchal order is further complicated by the very different roles that women play in different genres, a topic that has repeatedly engaged the attention of the feminist critics of Shakespeare. In comedies women are most often nurturing and powerful; as their values educate men mutuality between the sexes may be achieved. In tragedy, the roles of women are at once more varied, more constricted, and more precarious. While in comedy the heroines achieve their end gracefully by playing a part, in tragedy they are condemned for acting, accused of being deceitful, even when they are
not. Good women are often powerless, and powerful women are always threatening and often destructive. In the tragedies such women are either destroyed or absent from the new order consolidated at the end.

Given the complexities and ambiguities in the roles and positions of women, patriarchal constructions of feminine and sexual difference—imposed or embedded in social, political and religious discourses—find their way into the Shakespearean text. Given that language is not gender-neutral fact, sexual difference permeates linguistically into the literary text. As a result, there is a mutation of sexual and textual space into exchangeable categories, expressed through ambivalent circulation of female energy in the plays of Shakespeare.

This dissertation explores the implications of such ambivalent presentation with the help of feminist perspectives. Feminist critics of Shakespeare liberate women from the stereotypes to which they have too often been confined; they examine women’s relation to each other; they analyze the nature and effect of patriarchal structures; and they explore the influence of genre on the portrayal of women. As they explore the psychosexual dynamics that underlie the aesthetic, historical, and genre context, feminist critics find themselves in an increasingly close alliance with psychoanalytic critics. While many feminist critics do not find Freudian models of female sexual and psychological development entirely adequate, they make extensive use of psychoanalytic insights into male ambivalence towards female sexuality. Throughout the cannon these critics trace a persistent theme---men’s inability to
reconcile tender affection with sexual desire and their consequent vacillation between idealization and degradation of women. They suggest how structures of male dominance grow out of and mask fears of female power and of male feminization and powerlessness.

Critics differ in their estimation of how much conscious control is apparent in Shakespeare’s depiction of the relation between the sexes. Some claim that Shakespeare at least in some of the plays exploits the disjunction between the male characters fantasies about women and the portrayed nature of the female characters in order to question or explode sexist attitude towards women. Others think it unlikely that Shakespeare’s own attitudes can be so clearly separated from his gender, his male characters, his period; they see the profound fears of female sexuality and the desperate attempts to control it in the plays as reflections of male ambivalence rather than criticism of it. Feminist critics of Shakespeare contest the apparent misogyny of the plays and the resistance of their feminists students by directing attention to the world of the plays, using conventional tools of interpretation to asses Shakespeare’s attitude to the events within them. The feminist concern with traditional evaluations of sexual identity has been used to explore the ideals of violence in the psychological formation of Shakespeare’s male characters. Critics like Janet Adelman and Coppelia Kahn have developed a feminist psychoanalysis which places motherhood at the centre of psychological development. Coppelia Kahn in her book on *Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* explores ‘the unconscious
attitudes behind cultural definitions of manliness and womanliness and behind the mores and institution shaped by them”(11). Linda Bamber, on the other hand notes the fundamental inconsistencies between Shakespeare’s treatment of women in comedy and tragedy, and finds a cohering principle in Shakespeare’s recognition of women as ‘other’, which ‘amounts to sexism only if the writer fails to attribute to opposite sex characters the privileges of the other’(5). She further says, In tragedy his women are strong because they are coherent – ‘certainly none of the women in the tragedies worries or changes her mind about who she is’- and the attacks which are made on them are a product of male resentment at this strength –‘misogyny and sex nausea are born of failure and self-doubt(15). The comic feminine, on the other hand, is opposed not to men but to a reified ‘society’: In comedy the feminine either rebels against the social order or (more commonly) presides in alliance with the forces which challenge its hegemony; romantic love, physical nature, the love of pleasure in all its forms’(32).

Like Bamber, Marilyn French in Shakespeare’s Divisions of Experience constructs a god-like author who ‘breathed life into his female characters and gave body to the principles they are supposed to represent’. This feminine principle however amounts to little more than the power to nurture and give birth and is opposed to the masculine principle in the ability to kill. When men are approved of they are seen as embracing feminine principles whereas women are denied access to male and are denigrated when they aspire to male qualities.
French suggests that Shakespeare divides experience into male (evil) and female (good) principles and his comedies and tragedies are interpreted as ‘either a synthesis of the principles or an examination of the kinds of worlds that result when one or other principle is abused, neglected, devalued, or exiled’ (25)

In *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Juliet Dusinberre admires ‘Shakespeare’s concern … to dissolve artificial distinction between the sexes’ (153). She examines Shakespeare’s women characters in the light of Renaissance debates over women conducted in puritan handbooks and advice literature. Building on Haller’s essay on ‘The puritan art of love’, she notes the shifts of misogyny associated with Catholic asceticism to Puritan assertions of the importance of women in the godly household as partners in holy and companionate marriage. The main portion of the book is an elaboration of themes – chastity, Equality, Gods and Devils.

Thus, within a feminist perspective one can trace two main lines of approach to the Shakespearean text. The first assumes that ‘female’ attributes seen in the Shakespearean text reflects the entire range of specifically female qualities. Critics like Juliet Dusinberre and Anne Barton believe that Shakespeare transcends patriarchal partisanship and accords equal status to both the sexes. The second line of approach takes an opposite view in which Shakespeare’s society is taken to be oppressively chauvinistic which make his female characters warped and distorted. Within this approach the non-aggressive strand considers Shakespeare to be a true ‘reflecting glass’ of his time; the aggressive approach
sees Shakespeare's work as ‘sexist’ and sets to ‘uncover’ his prejudices. Coppelia Kahn argues that “Shakespeare’s masculinity inexorably colours his drama” and he struggles to establish a male identity within a patriarchal society. She argues that Shakespeare does not accord women equal status with men. Further, his belief in man’s unquestioned superiority is nevertheless implied in the plays. However, it needs to be seen if Shakespeare tacitly accepts, as suggested by Kahn and others, the conservative idea of a hierarchy in nature with man at the top and woman second.

These differing critical positions notwithstanding, the norms of feminity work in the interests of the dominant groups, mostly patriarchal. It is seen how language not only names male superiority but also produces it. The tendency of words to seem transparent, to appear simply to label a pre-existing reality, indicates the role played by language in the construction of a world-view which legitimises the existing patriarchal order. This dissertation shows how the Shakespearean text strategically accommodates and ‘contains’ the patriarchal discourse in its treatment of women. It examines the following hypotheses:

1. That in the Shakespearean context female deviancy is best seen as a patriarchal construct.

2. That language names and legitimises male supremacy.

3. That female stereotyping is a way of sublimating women.
4. That the women characters appear to enjoy textual and ideological space in the Shakespeare play but are ultimately made to submit or subscribe to the patriarchal order.

The dissertation tries to show that the bipolarity of male control of discourse and effects of silencing exist side by side with modes of sexual/textual resistance in the plays of Shakespeare. To this extent the Introduction examines the academic and social discourse within which the women find themselves placed. Apart from the various types of women characters who are discussed at length in the chapters to follow, the Introduction foregrounds some of the major debates surrounding women in Shakespeare, along with some of the issues taken up by major critiques.

Chapter 1, titled "Woman as Tool," examines how innocent women are used as tools of political designs. It also examines women who are not innocent and are used as accomplices and accessories. The chapter discusses how women like Isabella, Ophelia, Gertrude, Mariana, and Octavia are used by the male characters to achieve their desired goal. These women are seen through male eyes. All of them except Isabella speak very little and have very little scope for movement or to show their independence. Isabella, Mariana and Miranda are rewarded by marriage in which they have no choice; in brief they are married off. The two women in Hamlet, Gertrude and Ophelia, have no significant role to play. They are manipulated by men for personal gain. Ophelia is used by her father to gain political favour and Hamlet ill-treats and rejects her according to
his whims and fancies. Despite her complicity in her hasty marriage to her brother-in-law, Gertrude is not involved in the murder of her first husband. Rather she is used as an accessory by Claudius to gain access to the throne of Denmark. In Antony and Cleopatra, on the other hand, Octavia is used as a tool by both Caesar and Mark Antony whom she marries. She is the plain tool of statecraft between two powerful forces where her status as an individual is hardly considered. It follows that these women in their varying degrees of innocence or inexperience are manipulated by the forces of patriarchy.

Chapter 2, titled “Rebellious Daughters,” discusses how women challenge dominant fathers and, thereby, a powerful patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal order takes different forms and is portrayed with varied degrees of emphasis in Shakespeare. It is difficult, almost impossible, to evade the power of the father in the real world. Cordelia plays the price for her rebellion. She refuses to play her role in Lear’s public drama. However her defence is not a statement on her personal autonomy or rights of her individual will. She only asserts her right to retain a part of her love for her would-be husband. The harmony which is broken by her resistance to her father is restored by forgiveness and death at the end of the play. Rosalind rebels against the ill-treatment of her uncle and flees from the court in the guise of a man. While in disguise she enjoys the freedom normally enjoyed by men. She travels far and wide and even trains a chosen man in manners of wooing and loving a woman. While her disguise allows her to escape the patriarchal fold temporarily, the fact that she is reunited with her father, and
marries the man she loves, needs to be examined in this perspective. Jessica’s role in *The Merchant of Venice* is equally interesting. She not only defies her father and runs off with Lorenzo with a substantial part of her father’s wealth but also converts to Christianity. She challenges the undisputed rights of patriarchy over matters of inheritance, matrimony, and religion. On these three counts Jessica is best seen as a rebel against patriarchy symbolized by Shylock.

Chapter 3, titled “Mothers and Consorts,” examines women who manipulate the strings of power without actually occupying a public office. This chapter shows how Lady Macbeth, a woman driven by ambition, preys on her husband’s impressionable mind and works towards consolidating her husband’s power. What needs to be underlined is the politics of approximation that has historically guaranteed royal consorts the power to manoeuvre their passage through the complex corridors of power and violence. The text highlights her negative traits, as she is shown to be a cruel figure, and her acts are presented as unwomanly. It is interesting to note that by choosing to remain in the background of her husband’s violent usurpation of power, she strategically deflects attention from a series of ghoulish acts that Macbeth himself commits. It makes sense therefore to figure Lady Macbeth as a powerful ally, not tool, in what is a struggle for alternative legitimacy—based on ability and personal endowment rather than succession rules and royal entitlement—in a medieval succession war. Similarly, Margaret of Anjou and the Duchess of Gloucester are two ambitious consorts who unsuccessfully try to either wrest power or participate in the
distribution of power in the *Henry VI* plays as well as *Richard III*. The madness of Margaret and the dimming away of the Duchess of Gloucester would suggest how Shakespeare’s text shows the manipulative potential of royal consorts who oscillate between conflicting poles in their self-fashioning. On the one hand they appear to be tools in the wheels of power, manipulated, and then erased out from the frame, by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and lovers. On the other hand, they also operate as great schemers and plotters, aligning themselves in desperation to foes-turned-friends or in cold blood to murderers of parents, spouses and children. The fact that these women, witnesses both to the violence of power and the power of violence, try to bargain for space and legitimacy in power play, historically a male domain, lose out in their bargain alerts us to the limits of textual space granted to them by Shakespeare.

Chapter 4, titled “Political Women,” deals with powerful women who pose a threat to the patriarchal order and often succeed in manipulating it to their advantage. This chapter is different in thrust and focus from the earlier chapter in that here we see women who wield enormous power not only in the textual space but also in the social space. Cleopatra is probably the most significant example. She inverts the natural hierarchy but this inversion is transformed into female sexual predatoriness. Cleopatra’s appearance on stage is associated with the undermining of men. She is shown as directly responsible for Antony’s failing judgment and misguided action. Goneril and Regan desire power, as such they are represented as anarchic beings, while the Duchess of Gloucester rebels
against the lot of womanhood. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is a powerful and rich heiress. Despite all her power and intelligence she serves as a medium to transfer the wealth of her father to her husband. She has little choice in choosing a groom. Ultimately she abdicates her rank and status in favour of her husband Bassanio.

Chapter 5, titled “Woman as Excess,” deals with women who overrun the measure. Any sign of independence in a woman is considered unnatural and deviant. Such women are either projected as marginalized or condemned to a marginal status as they refuse to toe the patriarchal line. The tendency to excess is seen as subversive and unacceptable in society. Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV* wields some influence after her husband dies; Mistress Overdone in *Measure for Measure* represents the plight of the prostitutes in society. They are marginalized but the men who visit them are not condemned. The witches in *Macbeth*, presented as ugly and ‘moustached,’ are clearly threats to the patriarchal knowledge-power nexus, as they have transgressed the boundary by gathering scientific knowledge, useful to exercise power and control in the medieval world. Given that women were supposed to read only scriptures and holy books, those who ventured beyond this are unacceptable to society and therefore rejected. ‘Excesses’ in this case would refer both to epistemological and political excesses that threaten to overtake patriarchy. In plays like *Measure for Measure*, for instance, patriarchy attributes anarchy to excessive female sexuality that must be controlled or cured. This in turn results in
a politics of exclusion that surrounds or affects the so-called transgressing women. This relationship between fear of female excess and social choices needs greater attention.

Thus Shakespeare portrays varieties of womanhood on stage. Some women are allowed to flourish while others have no say in the course of the play. Having said that, women are made to accept the control and subordination of men. Interestingly, when this subordination is mediated by love, it is accepted by women. Interestingly, the moment she shows signs of independence (represented on stage as sexual rapaciousness and proneness to adultery), her ‘gifts’ become responsible for her downfall. The conduct of active and powerful women is looked upon as signs of female disruptiveness and condemned as ‘monstrous’ and ‘against nature’. Therefore it is necessary to see how the Shakespearean text strategically accommodates and contains the patriarchal discourse in its treatment of women. The Conclusion includes the major findings and weaves together some of the unresolved issues.