This chapter examines how women are seen or used as tools of political design in Shakespeare’s plays. Often women appear to have little say in the negotiations between powerful forces but find themselves playing the role of accessories or tools, whether innocently or otherwise. Some of women characters in Shakespeare who find themselves in such roles are Mariana and Isabella in Measure for Measure, Gertrude and Ophelia in Hamlet, Miranda in The Tempest, Octavia in Antony and Cleopatra, Blanche in King John, and Anne in Richard III. This chapter would examine how these women are manipulated by men around them, and have little scope for independent movement or thought. They are in the play to play the part, as it were, and once it is over they are either married off or killed or discarded.

Among the women discussed in this chapter only Isabella is given some scope of movement in the play. She tries to resist the patriarchal order and refuses to succumb to it by deciding to enter the nunnery. However, at the end of the play even she is married off to the Duke. The other women appear passive, and never question the men around them. So men find them to be most amenable and therefore easy tools for the accomplishment of their goals. While Isabella, Mariana and Miranda are absorbed into the patriarchal society by marriage, Gertrude, Ophelia, Octavia and Blanche become victims in the struggle for power.
amongst men. Anne is absorbed into marriage, the institution that controls women, and then disposed off.

Among the four women characters in the play—Mistress Overdone, Juliet, Mariana, and Isabella—Mistress Overdone is marginalised because of her profession, whereas Juliet has a minimal role to play. The women get a chance to voice their opinions but are also subjected to varying degrees of male sublimation in the course of the play. The only women who seem to have some position in the play are Isabella and Mariana. But their position is also circumscribed and they are brought into the action only when deemed necessary. They are used as ‘tools’ and are expected to play specified roles to suit the men who manipulate them.

Isabella is presented as a novice at the convent with little or no knowledge of human nature. Her first lines to the nun about stricter rules at the convent suggest as much. She is prepared to enter a life of abstinence without having experience life outside the convent. It is one of Shakespeare’s ironies that this innocent creature should be taken out of the convent by a self-confessed rake like Lucio. But the latter does it in an effort to save the life of his friend who also happens to be Isabella’s brother. In fact it is Claudio, her brother, who asks Lucio to fetch Isabella so that she could plead his case:

For in her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect
Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art
When she will play with reason and discourse,
And well she can persuade. (1.3.172-176)
Claudio already identifies her efficacy as a tool. It is interesting to see that Isabella, a virtuous maid committed to a life of chastity, is required to plead for the life of Claudio, her brother, who is condemned to death under a freshly revived piece of draconian legislation. Interestingly, Claudio is sentenced to death for having sexual relations with the woman he was supposed to marry. Isabella, on her part, shows signs of moral authority and independence, as she is seen questioning Angelo about her brother’s guilt and consequent punishment. She resists Angelo’s sexual bargain when the latter says that her brother’s life can be saved if she offers her body to him. At the same time, her moves are controlled and directed by men.

On the one hand, her persuasive skill, reasoning and language, can be seen as a great asset. While Claudio dwells on using his sister’s persuasive skill as a legitimate tool to save his life, he hopes that the real investment will come in the form of his sister’s bodily charm. Accordingly, when Lucio meets Isabella in the convent he asks her to appeal to Angelo as a woman. He convinces Isabella of her powers and abilities and gives her instructions on appropriate behaviour:

Go to Lord Angelo

And let him learn to know, when maidens sue

Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel,

All their petitions are as freely theirs (1.4.79-82).
Lucio asks her not just to weep but to be histrionic in her behaviour (weep and kneel). In the scene of her first plea to Angelo, Isabella gives up after Angelo refuses to pardon Claudio. But Lucio convinces her to continue with her efforts:

Giv’t not o’er so. To him again !entreat him
Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown
You are too cold. (2.2.43-5)

Isabella, obediently turns back to her appointed task. Gradually her rhetoric becomes impassioned and her speeches longer. But the asides and approving remarks of Lucio and the Provost continue to mediate our view of Isabella’s actions. Her victory is decided not by her rhetoric alone. An underlying element of sexual conflict pervades the entire scene which is made explicit in the bawdy innuendo of Lucio’s remark: “O’ to him, to him wench! He will relent;/ He’s coming: I perceive it” In this scene Lucio not only directs her but also acts as a mediator between her and the audience. Therefore, the audience being witnesses to Isabella’s performance understands, if not morally approves of Angelo’s reactions to it. Moreover, the rhetorical questions of the soliloquy which closes the scene also validate Angelo’s response:

Is this her fault or mine?
Can it be that modesty may more betray the sense
Than women’s lightness. (2.2.168-70)

Despite Isabella’s innocence her words belie her unconscious sexuality at times:
Th’ impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I’d yield
My body up to shame (2.4.101-4).

The text appears to suggest that she is ripe for a relationship although she is on the brink of renouncing the world. These contradictions appear to justify or consolidate Angelo’s belief that he could force her into an intimate relationship. Thus Isabella’s role in her first encounter with Angelo seems to be no more than to foreground the hidden passions of Angelo, which are given free rein in their second meeting. In this scene Angelo voices his feelings and tries to impose them on Isabella. She, however does not submit to his demands and threatens to denounce Angelo publicly. Angelo replies:

Who will believe thee Isabel?
My unsoiled name, th’ austerness of my life,
My vouch against you, and my place I’ th’ state
Will so your accusations overweigh,
That you shall stifle in your own report,
And smell of calumny. (2.4.153-58)

Thus women, when pitted against men of power, are not taken seriously. Angelo reduces her to a sexual tool, a commodity, but she can only resist with anger not return the compliment. Lisa Jardine says that only if Isabella “had actually been raped: dishevelled and endlessly weeping her testimony would be
impeccable”(191). Isabella’s opinion or consent is not important and Angelo asks her to ‘Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite’ (2.4.160).

Angelo appears to regard all women as mindless creatures to be used and discarded at will. He had broken his contract to Mariana when her brother’s death at sea changed her financial prospects. Angelo decides that he cannot marry her without her dowry and so rejects her on grounds of ‘discovered’ infidelities. When he is next attracted to a woman, he finds Isabella in front of him and is quite disturbed: “Having waste ground enough,/ Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary/ And pitch our evils there?” (2.2. 170-72) However, having decided that he may as well “write good angel on the devil’s horn” (2.4. 16), he advises her to put on “the destin’d livery” (2.4. 137). That Angelo should ask Isabella to offer her body for her brother’s life is indication enough that for him she an exchangeable good in a barter system, or at least an object for his gratification.

It may be recalled that Isabella’s potential is first tapped by her desperate brother for a just cause, however self regarding his need. That seems to set off the round of manoeuvres and manipulations by Lucio, Angelo and the Duke, all figuring Isabella. To her credit she tries to listen and till Angelo comes up with his demands she does not find things going out of her control. When Claudio pleads with her to save his life, she fails to appreciate his situation and denounces him soundly, affirming what she had told Angelo: “More than our brother is our chastity” (2.4.184). While Isabella’s anger is justified, her resolution: “Then Isabel live chaste and brother die” (2.4.183) appears to be cold and selfish.
However, Isabella, may be arguing on behalf of all women as pointed out by Eagleton. If she were to compromise her values and give in to Angelo’s demands, what woman in Vienna would be safe? Thus unwittingly or otherwise, Isabella’s cold resistance may be seen as a kind of rearguard action against all her fellow women. This again, sets the stage for Duke’s timely interference as he takes control of and plans and directs her future course of action. But as the play shows, the Duke has his purpose: he has to scale the corrupt deputy through the agency of the two women—Marianna and Isabella---and at the same time bring the latter out of her cold self-regard. For this whole project he has to use loving coercion in the friar’s guise to ensure the women’s compliance. First, he has to use Isabella to keep Angelo on a string till Mariana is apprised of the situation and goes to meet Angelo’s demands instead of Isabella. By this both women would be helping each other and Claudio’s life would be saved.

Interestingly, Isabella allows herself to be persuaded by the Duke as friar and even agrees to the substitution of Mariana for herself. Her reply after a few queries is soft and submissive: “Show me how, good father”(80). Once she realises that she does not have to take on any personal risk, she does not hesitate to use Marianna’s services to serve her end, nor does she worry about Mariana’s possible loss of honour. The Duke realises that she has one more threshold to cross but before he could use her for that end Angelo’s pre-emptive moves threaten to take things out of control.
Having enjoyed Isabella’s favours in the darkness of the night (as he believes), Angelo promptly sends an order for Claudio’s immediate execution and demands that the severed head be sent to him. While the chance resemblance between Claudio and the just dead Ragozine lead to the substitution of heads sent to Angelo, at the Friar’s insistence, Claudio has to be hidden deep inside the prison. The Duke as Friar informs Isabella of Angelo’s orders and allows her to believe that she has lost her brother. He then prepares to resume office and sends letters advising everybody including the interim rulers and the common people to meet him with their grievances at the city gates.

The final showdown and the scaling of the corrupt Angelo are further delayed as the two unhappy women, Isabella and Mariana, are subjected to further humiliation by the newly returned Duke and his deputies. Here too, the Duke has a purpose as he shows how justice could miscarry and how the common people find themselves at a natural disadvantage when appealing against the injustice of those in authority. Finally however, Angelo is exposed and he is ordered to marry Mariana (to restore her honour) before he is hanged. Immediately after her marriage, Mariana pleads for Angelo’s life and requests Isabella to join her appeals. Isabella, believing herself wronged, still goes down on her knees to appeal for Angelo for Mariana’s sake. That she can rationalise his abuse on grounds of extenuating circumstances, proves that she is ready to think of someone else’s needs before her own. Moreover, she has to accept that the wrong done to her by Angelo was one of its kind. The Duke is finally happy that
Isabella overcomes her limitations and his purpose of making her realise the value of selfless love is served. Till that time, Isabella is told that “tis a physic/That’s bitter to sweet end” (4.6. 8-9).

Thus, taking her into confidence, the Duke uses Isabella and Mariana to expose Angelo in Act 5. He keeps from Isabella the knowledge of Claudio’s safety; he tests her by making her plead for Angelo. But once his purpose is over, Isabella is also ‘settled in marriage’. She is betrothed to the Duke without a line of dialogue indicating her feelings about the matter. Her silence illustrates the threat to female individuality in a world ruled by strong powerful men. Though manipulated by the men Isabella, tries to assert herself, and is given some scope of movement. Mariana, despite being manipulated, shows an innate strength of character.

Mariana of whom we hear in Act 3 is actually introduced in Act 4. She lives in a country grange, isolated from the world. Her presence or lack of it in the play depends on the whims and fancies of a man. Angelo’s defection sends her into a self-imposed exile and it is the Duke as Friar who persuades her to come out of it and help Isabella and at the same time settle an old personal score. At some risk to her person and reputation she agrees to act as a tool to help Isabella and expose Angelo.

The Duke, disguised as Friar, is seen to be most successful in manipulating the least powerful and socially dependent characters. He makes of Mariana a ‘model of dutiful subjection’ (Dollimore). The Duke exploitation of
Mariana is very clear when he says;” The maid will I frame and make fit for his attempt (3.2.266). The law is manipulated according to the men in power. The act which is considered a crime in Juliet is not considered so in Mariana’s because it is necessary for the execution of the Duke’s plan. In the latter part of the play Mariana is restored within the parameters of permitted sexual relations by being married to Angelo. The duke tells Angelo to love Mariana, adding: “I have confessed her and I know her virtue”(5.1.524). Mariana though projected as a virtuous maid needs the assurance of the Duke. It is the men who define the character of women.

Although Mariana seems quite passive in comparison to the other characters, her role in the play cannot be undermined. For, she acts as foil to Isabella who learns the value of selfless love from her. Mariana’s selflessness helps Isabella to overcome her own limitations. Although they are not allowed to act independently or to do anything decisive on their own, they at least help each other to realise their own feminity. In the larger context of the play, however, they end up as somewhat passive tools in the hands of the men, especially the Duke.

The Duke tries to reinstate a kind of order in Vienna. He uses the two women in the play to fulfil his scripting. His choice of religious disguise offers him a secure position although he cannot avoid Lucio’s barbs. Thus the two women are used as tools but interestingly, they discover their own limitations and
capabilities. While Mariana upholds the values of humanity at all costs, Isabella discovers herself in the course of being used as a tool.

That three different men—four if we count Lucio—use her and not all of them for intrigue or some nefarious purpose, suggests that the roles women as tools are required to fulfil may vary. Some may be innocent and unaware, some not so innocent nor wholly unaware and some others may be wholly conscious cohorts or accessories in some patriarchal design.

Similarly Miranda in *The Tempest* is used as a tool by Prospero, her father.

The events in *The Tempest* are controlled by Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan. The story is centres around the power struggle between Prospero and his brother Antonio. Within that frame are the political conspiracies that take place on the island. Prospero, once the duke of Milan, was overthrown and banished by his brother Antonio with the help of the king of Naples. He lands on an island with his infant daughter Miranda and makes that his home. This is the island of Caliban and his mother Sycorax. Prospero with his magic powers takes control of the island and makes Caliban his slave. It may be mentioned that Prospero had been a negligent duke in Milan, more interested in studies in magic, than in the ruling of his dukedom. On the island, however, Prospero takes care to be a vigilant ruler and instead of soldiers or even minions, he has his magic. Gradually as his daughter grows up he forges his elaborate plans for their return to Milan. His plans centre around Miranda’s marriage to the son of the king of Naples.
thereby paving the way for his own return as the lawful duke of Milan. As Prospero lays down his plans and starts implementing them one after another, we see him manipulating his daughter as a tool for his ultimate return to power.

On the island Prospero is an omnipotent figure. He is the creator as well as controller of events. The actions of the play are all foreseen or overseen by Prospero. In addition to Miranda the only other woman in the play is Sycorax, the “foul witch” and bad mother who penned Ariel in a cloven pine and gave birth to Caliban the freckled whelp. Miranda grows up on the island with Caliban and teaches him how to speak. But as Miranda grows older Caliban becomes a threat to her. Prospero accuses him of having sought “to violate/ the honour of my child” (1.2.349-50). Caliban replies “Thou didst prevent me, I had peopled else /this isle with Calibans” (1.2.351-53). While the need to protect Miranda from Caliban gives Prospero an excuse to enslave Caliban, it also makes Miranda aware of her sexuality and Prospero makes the best use of Miranda’s readiness for a husband. He guards her sexuality subsuming it into his larger project for the settling of old scores and resumption of his role in Milan.

While Prospero sets a lot in store for Miranda’s marriage, critics like Bamber, consider it a “slim thread” by which “Prospero will be returned to the world beyond his own island” (172 ). Prospero’s control of her is not unkind. He does not bully his daughter but pays close attention to her needs and responses. She is the royal offspring of a ducal father. She is incomparably beautiful; her
external beauty mirrors her inward virtue. Miranda is educated, chaste and obedient but Prospero’s control of her diminishes her dramatic significance.

Miranda is introduced in Act 1, Scene 2, she is the obedient daughter who sees the world through her father’s eyes. Prospero tells her that ‘the hour’s now come’ when she should know about her past life. Prospero narrates the incidents of his past and tries to clarify her doubts; Miranda all through addresses him as ‘Sir’. And when she enquires the reasons for raising the storm Prospero gives her a hurried reply and asks her to ‘cease more questions’. He puts her to sleep saying ‘I know thou canst not choose’. This scene demonstrates Prospero’s magic powers which he uses not only on Miranda but also to raise the tempest, and to subjugate Ariel and the native Caliban. Miranda is only a silent spectator in the scene and Prospero reveals to her or allows her only as much space as is necessary for the success of his plot. Prospero’s control of his daughter is established and never questioned in the course of the play. The most important clue to this is Prospero’s address to Miranda towards the end of the scene as: “What! I say, / My foot my tutor” (1.2.). This crucial line is spoken when Miranda is worried for Ferdinand because Prospero accuses Ferdinand of being a spy, a traitor and a usurper. Miranda, who has seen no other men on the island except her father and Caliban, falls in love with Ferdinand the moment she sees him, which suits Prospero’s plan. Prospero tries to cement the young couples love by placing obstacles on their way. He threatens to manacle Ferdinand’s feet together and to force him to drink salt water. When Ferdinand tries to resist,
Prospero magically deprives him of all his strength. Miranda, who is totally ignorant of her father’s plan is alarmed and cries

O! dear father

Make not too rash a trial of him, for

He’s gentle and not fearful     (469-71)

To this Prospero reminds her that she is his ‘foot’ and tutor’. As she is the foot Miranda cannot reason but only follow directions. A body cannot work independent of the head, so is Miranda’s position. She is an actor in Prospero’s drama and has no independent role to play. Prospero demands her absolute and unthinking obedience.

Miranda is an obedient actress in the drama of Prospero’s own creation. She appears to enjoy some space while voicing her feelings for Ferdinand. But this space is also under Prospero’s surveillance, though she is not aware of it. Prospero treats Ferdinand harshly at the beginning “least too light winning make the prize light”. Miranda speaks for Ferdinand and requests her father to be kind:

Miranda: Beesech you father

Prospero: Hence! hang not on my garments

Miranda: sir have pity : I’ll be his surety         (1.2. 477-79)

She pleads for Ferdinand and even comes to see him when he is set to work. And in the wooing scene (3.1.) Miranda appears as a figure of sturdy independence because she appears to act entirely on her own behalf steadily pursuing Ferdinand against her father’s wishes and also organises her own marriage. When Ferdinand
asks her “what is your name”? she replies “ Miranda,- O my father ,/ I have broken your haste to say so” (3.1.36-37). Miranda asks of Ferdinand: “Do you love me “. And when he replies in the affirmative she declares: “My husband then” (88). Miranda’s courtship of Ferdinand, displays simultaneously her courageous independence of Prospero and her complete encirclement by him. She is secretly watched by Prospero, who stands behind unseen. Like a playwright watching his own show he comments on the scene:

“poor worm , thou art infected!”

“Fair encounter / of two most rare affections” (3.1.74-75)

And when the scene is over Prospero pronounces:

“so glad of this as they I cannot be
Who are surprise’d with all; But my rejoicing
at nothing can be more” (3.1. 92-94)

Our pleasure in Miranda’s success is under Prospero’s control. Prospero directs Miranda to the husband who will best serve his own purpose. Miranda’s courtship of Ferdinand does not indicate her independence, because the audience is aware that everything is going according to Prospero’s plan. Miranda dutifully falls in love with the man her father chooses for her. When Miranda and Prospero and Ferdinand are officially betrothed in Act-IV, scene-I, Prospero says to Ferdinand:

Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition

Worthily purchased take my daughter (4.1. 14-15)

After this they fade gracefully from the plot, until Prospero reveals them playing chess to Ferdinand’s ‘lost ‘ father. Thus Miranda is nurtured, tutored, and
controlled by Prospero. He uses her to settle old scores and resume his role in Milan. Miranda is married off to Ferdinand who will take her back to the sophisticated world of court life. Miranda is deprived of any possibility of human freedom, growth, or thought. She is admired and sheltered and has no way of cycle of dependence on men.

The two women in *Hamlet*, Ophelia and Gertrude, are neutral characters who are used by the men in the play to serve their needs. According to David Leverenz “Women are the source of his (Hamlet) most acute perceptions about diseased, disordered patriarchal society” (113). Ophelia is used by her father Polonius to gain political favour, and king Claudius uses her to spy on Hamlet. According to Lee Edwards “we can imagine Hamlet’s story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet.” Ophelia appears in only five of the plays twenty scenes. She is introduced in Act I scene 3 where she is with her brother Laertes and father Polonius. Ophelia goes against social mores by seeing Hamlet without her father’s approval. In this scene Laertes warns Ophelia not to lay her “Chaste treasure” open to his “unmaster’d opportunity”. Ophelia in her reply promises to remember his advice:

I shall th’ effect of this good lesson keep,
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance tread s
And recks not his own reed  (45-51)
The double standards prevalent in the treatment of men and women are evident in Ophelia’s reply to her brother. Polonius is not violently opposed to Hamlet but he tells Ophelia that he wants to know exactly what is going on between her and Hamlet. When Ophelia discloses the developments he chides her for her naivety and insists that Hamlet wants only sexual favours. When Ophelia says she does not know how to interpret Hamlet’s favours Polonius replies: “Marry, I’ll teach you.” Polonius thereafter advises her to spurn any advances that Hamlet might make. Ophelia meekly agrees and says: “I shall obey, my lord” (1.3.136).

While the concern of Laertes and Polonius at one level is justified on the ground that Hamlet being a prince might take advantage of Ophelia, it is evident that Polonius has some other plans in mind for which he uses Ophelia. Moreover, Ophelia is not allowed to think about her relationship with Hamlet. She is made to accept her father’s viewpoint and directed to act according to his advice thereby becoming a convenient and innocent tool of her father.

After stringent warnings from her father and brother, Ophelia meekly agrees to spurn any advances that Hamlet may make. We do not see her on stage with Hamlet until Act 3. This shows that the relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia is subsidiary to the main preoccupation of the play: how to avenge the murder. When Ophelia next appears in Act 2 Scene 1, she reports to her father that “As you did command / I did repel his letters and denied / His access to me” (2.2.108-110). Ophelia tells Polonius how she was ‘affrighted’ by the sudden appearance of Hamlet in a grip of emotion into her private room. From Ophelia’s
account we learn that Hamlet does not speak to her but holds her by the wrist and stares at her; even when he leaves he does not take his eyes off her, and as she says “to the last bended their light on me”. Listening to Ophelia’s account of Hamlet’s behaviour, Polonius concludes that her coldness towards him had made him mad. But there is no indication from Hamlet to support this interpretation.

It may be noted that in Act 1 Scene 4 Hamlet decides to put “an antic disposition on“ (72) to accomplish his plans and avenge his father’s death. He thus uses Ophelia as a medium or tool to convince the people at court about his madness. Ophelia who is unaware of the manipulations becomes a tool in the hands of her father as well as Hamlet. Unable to comprehend Hamlet’s behaviour, she succumbs to the next plan of Polonius who along with the king devices a strategy to get to the truth of Hamlet’s madness. Polonius tells the king:

I’ll lose my daughter to him;

Be you I Behind an arras then

Mark the’ encounter (2.2. 162-64)

The plot of Claudius and Polonius shows the patriarchal control and domination. Here Ophelia is used as a bait for Hamlet. By agreeing to lead Hamlet on while Claudius and Polonius listen, Ophelia technically betrays Hamlet. Like an obedient daughter Ophelia never doubts her father, therefore she thinks her father would be able to find the cause of Hamlet’s strange behaviour. What she fails to realise is that Hamlet might suspect her of complicity with his adversaries. Given the interfering nature of Polonius, Hamlet suspects that Ophelia is being set up to
draw out of him his meditated course of action. In brief he thinks that Ophelia is being used as a tool by her father and more seriously by Claudius, his uncle.

Consequently, Hamlet’s behaviour and attitude towards her is ambiguous. In her encounter with him in Act 3 scene 1 he asks her cruelly ambiguous questions about her chastity. Ophelia is unable to understand what he means and her utter inability to spar wittily with him leads Hamlet on to taunt her more and more. It is almost as if he is desperately trying to get some spark of reaction from her. He cuts as deeply as he can, insulting her adored father, accusing her of promiscuity, rejecting her harshly: “Get thee to a nunnery, go; farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well what monsters you make of them”. (3.1.139-142). While Hamlets berates and confuses her at will, Ophelia, like Gertrude in the closet scene, is reduced to one liners:

Ophelia: What means your lordship
I was the more deceived
Heavenly powers restore him (3.1. 106,120,140)

After he leaves the scene Ophelia speaks “of ladies most deject and wretched”. Ophelia does not know of Hamlet’s feigned madness and therefore she feels sorry that a “noble mind is here O’erthrown”.

Ophelia next appears In Act III, Scene I, when Hamlet has arranged for a play to prick Claudius’s conscience. In this scene Hamlet chooses to sit with Ophelia as “mettle more attractive” than his mother. He cracks bawdy jokes to humiliate her.
Hamlet: Lady shall I lie on your lap              (110)

Hamlet: That’s a fair thought to lie between maids legs       (116)

By playing with Ophelia and sneering at her innocence Hamlet here tries to boost his own confidence. Ophelia finds Hamlet’s behaviour incomprehensible. Apart from being the butt of Hamlet’s jokes, Ophelia has no significant contribution to the scene. She has no idea of Hamlet’s plans and takes his words seriously, but Hamlet has no business with Ophelia. He only wants to observe the reactions of Claudius and Gertrude as they watch the play.

Ophelia, who is already confused by the behaviour and rejection of Hamlet is further shocked by the death of her father at the hands of her beloved. She has always been dependent on her father, brother, and Hamlet for guidance, assurance and love. She becomes helpless after these men, who act like her props desert her one by one. Ophelia is left alone to endure her grief. She is overwhelmed by sorrow and is distracted with thinking obsessively of her dead father. Even in madness her ‘ravings’ relate directly to the two essentials of her personality: her deep love for her father and her worry about the nature of her relationship with Hamlet:

Oph: How should I your true love know

From another one                      (4.2.23-24)

Oph: He is Dead and   gone, lady,

He is dead and gone;                  (4.5.29-30)
Her prime concern is however her chastity. As she is ‘divided from herself and her fair fair judgement’ now she can speak without inhibition and she suddenly turns to bawdy ballads:

Young men will do’t, if they come to’t
By cock they are to blame.
Quoth she, before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed:

(He answers)
So would I ha’done, by yonder son,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.

It can be said that unable to stand the pressures of patriarchal manipulations Ophelia becomes mad and commits suicide. Ophelia never challenges the wishes of her father, brother, or Hamlet. She is borne along by the plot as much as the cold stream takes her to death: “Your sister’s drowned, Laertes”. Her death gives an added spur to Laertes’ revenge against Hamlet; her burial brings them suddenly face to face as they leap into the grave to fight out the proof of their affection for her. Laertes blames Hamlet for her madness, and each man is enraged by the other’s claim to be her chief mourner. Ophelia can be seen as a victim who suffers for something that is completely out of her control. But the situation of Gertrude is completely different.

Gertrude appears in only ten of the twenty scenes that comprise the play. But we hear a great deal of discussion of Gertrude’s personality and actions by
other characters. She is the object of violent emotional reactions in the ghost and Hamlet. The ghost expresses simultaneous outrage, disgust and protectiveness for Gertrude in his first appearance:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest
But howsoever thou pursues this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught (5.82-86)

Hamlet’s violent emotions toward his mother are obvious from his first soliloquy which mostly expresses his anger and disgust at what he perceives to be Gertrude’s weakness, insensitivity, and bestiality: “O most wicked speed: to post/with such dexterity to incestuous sheets” (1.2.56-57). But on examining Gertrude’s actual speeches and actions in an attempt to understand her character, one finds little hints at hypocrisy or uncontrolled passions of which she is generally accused. The Gertrude that we see is her son’s mother and a worried affectionate partner to her husband, who happens to be going through a period of political danger. She appears totally innocent of the crime that Claudius has committed. It is in fact Claudius who uses her as a tool to gain access to the throne of Denmark. “The precise nature of Gertrude’s faults and the extent of her recognition of them are ambiguous. This ambiguity is not only consistent with the problematic nature of the whole play, but contributes to her characterisation
as a dependent, solicitous woman. It also emphasises the stereotypical and fantasized aspects of Hamlet’s misogyny’ (Woman’s Part 203).

Gertrude speaks very little in the play. And her speeches mostly refer to Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship. She speaks in a plain and direct language and most of the time she asks questions. It may be noted that Gertrude usually enters a scene with the king. She repeatedly leaves the scenes after being ordered by Claudius, which he does to protect her from the discovery of his guilt. Her obedient rising at the Kings, “madam, come’, suggest her domination by him. She leaves the stage in three later scenes upon similar words from the king: “Sweet Gertrude leave us” (3.1.); Come Gertrude” (5.1); Lets follow Gertrude” (4.7). This according to Linda Bamber is “a sign of Gertrude’s ‘attendant lord’ status in the play. It is a sign of the dramatic necessity to sweep her off the stage without calling much attention to her” (77).

Gertrude’s own words and actions compel one too see her as a quiet and careful mother and wife. Moreover the text does not give any evidence of her involvement in the murder of old Hamlet. When speaking to Hamlet the ghost does not state or suggest Gertrude’s guilt in his murder, but only her “falling off” from him to Claudius (1.5.47). When Hamlet confronts her in the closet scene, she asks in apparent innocence,

What have I done, that thou dar’st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me (3.4.39-40)
And when Hamlet informs her that old Hamlet was murdered by Claudius she exclaims in horror, “As kill a king” (3.4.30). In the closet scene Hamlet never accuses her of adultery, but abhors her choice of an “adulterate” second husband:

Can you on this fair mountain leave to feed,  
And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes?  
You cannot call it love, for at your age  
The heyday in your blood is tame, it’s humble,  
And waits upon the judgement: and what judgement  
Would step from this to this. (3.4.67-71)

Gertrude marries Claudius in innocence and good faith. She neither deceives anyone nor is she an adulterer. But she has been “adulterated “by her contact, even innocently in marriage, with Claudius. Similarly his crimes and deceit make Gertrude guilty of incest. In other words it is Claudius who uses Gertrude as an accomplice or accessory to minimise his guilt and deflect attention from his crime. Her hasty marriage to Claudius also suggests her extremely dependent personality. Gertrude is a compliant and accommodating woman. In the early part of the play she complies with Claudius’s wishes. After the play-within –the play and the closet scene, she agrees to Hamlet’s request not to “ravel all this matter out”, since he is but “mad in craft” (3.4.186-88) And she is true to her word. Thus Gertrude is a woman of few words. She is a weak, malleable, submissive, and a totally dependent personality. She is easily led and makes no decision for herself except, ironically, the one that leads to her death:
King: Gertrude, do not drink
Queen: I will, my lord, I pray you, pardon me.

Although not overtly corrupt, Gertrude finds herself in the role of an accessory. After the murder of her first husband, Gertrude allows herself to be persuaded into marrying her brother-in-law who uses the marriage as a stepping stone to the crown. Instead of waiting for the absent prince Hamlet, after the hasty marriage, Claudius proclaims himself the king. The marriage deflects attention from the unnatural death of the king and acts as a cover-up for Claudius’ criminal act. Otherwise how could Gertrude have married the murderer of her husband King Hamlet? The marriage also legitimises the usurpation of the throne as Claudius claims to be Hamlet’s father and guardian. Her foolish acceptance of things at face value reflects Gertrude’s lack of prudence or wisdom following the maturity of her years. Moreover, her susceptibility to Claudius’ sexual overtures show her as a silly woman waiting to be exploited by those who are more intelligent. These are some of the reasons for Hamlet’s disgust with her. She allows herself to actions. If Gertrude appears to be complicit with Claudius for mutual gain, the same cannot be said about Octavia who finds herself being pushed into the role of an intermediary between two of the triumvirs of the Roman world.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* Octavia is the helpless tool of two powerful manipulators – her brother Octavius Caesar and her husband Antony. Women like Octavia and Blanche (in *King John*) show the diplomacy of political marriage in sixteenth century England. In this connection Erasmus observes that
the consequences of such marriage is “not the absence of wars, but rather the cause of making wars more frequent and more atrocious; for while one kingdom is allied to another through marriage, whenever anyone is offended he uses his right of relationship to stir up others” (In Dusinberre 294). In Antony and Cleopatra Octavia is used as a tool to secure an alliance between Antony and Octavius; later she serves as a pretext, a right excuse for Octavius’ renewed aggression against Antony. Neither her husband nor her brother considers her feelings in their game of politics.

Mark Antony returns to Rome at the death of his wife Fulvia; he is already under attack from Caesar for Fulvia’s waging war against the former’s forces and for not complying with the diktats of Rome as far as Cleopatra is concerned. Instead of levying the taxes on Cleopatra as desired by Rome and taking her to task for her aggressive policy towards it, Antony is enchanted by the Egyptian queen. He comes to Rome from Cleopatra’s arms on receiving news of Fulvia’s death. Yet he allows himself to be drawn into the trappings of statecraft and cold bloodedly enters into the marriage suggested by Caesar’s men. It appears that it is more of a business, or in this case, political agreement than the forging of a lifetime’s bond. Small wonder then that Enobarbus remarks that “he [Antony] will to his Egyptian dish again” (2.6.123).

The marriage is proposed by Caesar’s lieutenant Agrippa to solidify the renewed alliance between Antony and Caesar. In Octavia’s absence the two men enact an Elizabethan betrothal ceremony; parodying the customary form of
spousals, they take hands, deny impediment, and vow love and fidelity to each other:

Antony: From this day

The heart of brothers govern in our loves

And swa our great designs

Caesar: Ther’s my hand

A sister I bequeath, you whom no brother

Did ever love so dearly. Let her live

To join our kingdoms and our heart; and never

Fly off our love’s again (2.2.147-54)

This betrothal embodies the purpose of the marriage, which is, as Agrippa tells the two triumvirs:

To hold you in perpetual amity,

To make you brother’s, and to knit your hearts

With an unslipping knot (2.2.126-128)

The marriage is made possible by Caesar’s “power unto Octavia” (2.2.149) and by her willingness, docility, and perfect obedience to him. She is not consulted in this matter, and being a widow she does not appear to be too unhappy either. To all appearances, her brother has arranged her marriage to a powerful triumvir.
That the Romans, including Caesar expect Antony to neglect her, indicates their opportunism and wily statecraft. Octavia, like Gertrude in Hamlet, is caught between the two men. The stage direction, for her first entrance in Act 2 Scene 3, encapsulates her dilemma: “Enter Antony, Caesar, Octavia between them. At her parting from Caesar, Octavia is paralysed by her divided love as:

Swansdown feather

That swells upon the swells at full tide

And neither way inclines (3.2.49-51)

At her third appearance Caesar and Antony have fallen out, and Octavia, finding “no midway / twixt these extremes at all” chooses brother over her husband. She has no way out because Antony was never serious about her. He calls his marriage to Octavia the “business” as he says: “though I make this marriage for my peace, / in the east my pleasure lies” (2.3.38-39). Enobarbus rightly points out: “Antony will use his affection where it is. He married but his occasion here.” (2.4. 132). Under these circumstances, Octavia makes vain attempts to influence Antony, who in fact has no use of his “holy, cold” wife. She is a ruthless victim of politics, and has no power over the heart she tries to sway:

O my lord

Believe not all, or, if you must believe,

Stomach not all. A more unhappy lady,

If this division chance, ne’er stood between,

Praying for both parts (3.3.10-14)
She pleads in vain for the trust which Agrippa had promised between her brother and her husband. There is much more at stake than sibling love or family honour. Octavius would like to strike out at Antony on the pretext of guarding Octavia’s honour.

As if on cue Antony sends Octavia to her brother and himself proceeds from Athens to Egypt and Cleopatra. While Octavius’ motives are clear, Antony’s intentions are rather ambivalent. His heart lay with Cleopatra yet he coldly enters into a marriage with Octavia as a political convenience. She is a tool of statecraft, no more. He has no intention of staying faithful to her. Her presence as an individual counts for little.

The situation of Blanche in King John is even more extreme. Blanche, the niece of King John is married off to Louis, son of Philip, the king of France in order to consolidate an alliance between England and France. The marriage proposal is made by the citizen of Algiers to prevent a war between the two countries. It may be mentioned that the king of France wages war against King John in support of Arthur, the rightful heir to the throne of England. However finding the proposal favourable he agrees to the marriage.

The citizen of Angiers proposes the marriage so that the King may win the city without “stroke or wound” and it would be a friendly treaty to their “threatened town”, The citizen says:
two such silver currents when they join
Do glorify the banks that bound them in:
And two such shores to two such streams made one,
Two such controlling bounds shall you be, kings,
To these two princes, if you marry them: (2.1.441-45)

On hearing the proposal, Elinor, John’s mother, asks John to marry off Blanche with a huge dowry because: “by this knot thou shalt so surely tie /Thy now unsured assurance to the crown.”. (2.1.470-71)

King John finding it a favourable option proposes the alliance to the King of France and promises a dowry equal to that of a queen. Blanche is also totally dependent on her uncle, and When King John asks for her consent she says that: “she is bound in honour still to do/What you in wisdom still vouchsafe to say.” She gives her consent to Lewis with the following words:

My uncle's will in this respect
is mine.
If he see aught in you that makes him like,
That anything he sees, which moves his liking,
I can with ease translate it to my will: (2.1. 510-13)

Thus, this marriage of convenience is made to prevent a war, and the two parties are reconciled and prepare for as King John says “Unlooked for, unprepared pomp”. But this does not last long, The marriage vows of Blanche and Lewis are hardly over before Pandulph, the Roman legate, arrives to divorce the unholy
alliance of the faithful and apostate country, Blanche becomes a victim of this diplomacy. Her new husband urges his father to take up arms against his new wife’s land. Blanche begs upon her knees to prevent the war and cries:

Upon thy wedding-day? Against the blood that thou hast married?

What, shall our feast be kept with slaughtered men? (3.1.300-02)

But, in this world of politics no body except Blanche believes in the fiction of love. Lewis, her husband, does not even answer her when Blanche upbraids him:

“Now shall I see thy love? What motive may be stronger with thee than the name of wife?” Blanche fails to realise that the motif behind her marriage was political, and her husband would never choose otherwise. In fact her dilemma itself remain unanswered in the play, because she is silently dropped after this scene:

"Which is the side that I must go withal?

I am with both. Each army hath a hand, (3.1.327-328)

Thus, Blanche is a victim of political marriage, she is used as a tool to secure the alliance which unfortunately does not last long. Her marriage is just serious politics without any passion involved in it. In this game of political transaction, Blanche, like Octavia, can be assured only of a loss.

While Anne, the widowed daughter-in-law of Henry-VI, is no ingénue, she is still a beautiful young woman who finds herself without any support and falls prey to Richard’s combined flattery and avowals of security. In Richard the Third, Anne, as Warwick’s heir and Prince Edward’s widow, is too central to the
dynastic struggle to hope for a quiet life. Shakespeare depicts her situation as so desperate and her character as so uncertain that only after her death do words avail her. Anne is a foil against whom Richard can display his virtuosity. Lady Anne’s public mourning for her late father-in-law and husband, Prince Edward, denotes resolution. As best as she can, she conforms to proper decorum for a widowed princess. That only she dares mourn Henry and Edward underlines her courage and her dangerous isolation as a Lancastrian. The plight Anne finds herself in at least partly explains her surrender to Richard. Richard uses Anne’s attractiveness against her. Shakespeare characterizes her as extraordinarily susceptible to calculated flattery.

Shakespeare draws Anne as the least powerful of all the history plays’ war widows. What store of strength remains to her is exhausted in invective during her first encounter with Richard; she hates but not well, in time electing her own feminine nature as target for reproof: “Within so small a time, my woman’s heart / Grew grossly captive to his honey words . . .” (4.2.78–79). In her we have the figure of a beautiful young widow manipulated for political gain. As Margaret’s erstwhile daughter-in-law, Anne represents a younger generation of victimized women. Her rhetorical facility, the biting stichomythia of act 1, scene 2, cannot safeguard her. (4.1.68). Only when she invades Richard’s dream, speaking as the ghost of the wife Richard murdered, are her words effectual: “Despair and die!” (5.3.163). But neither this effort nor self-recrimination enables her to transcend the image that Richard uses to construct her in the first
place. It is to be noted that the dramatic presentation of Richard’s wooing of Anne simultaneously justifies and parodies the political vulnerability of women in general and Anne in particular. As elsewhere, dramatisation of female sexuality draws on the larger social narrative of the representation of women in early modern England. For instance, when Richard gloats over his successful manipulation of Anne, he says:

> Was ever woman in this humour woo’d?
> Was ever woman in this humour won?
> I’ll have her, but I’ll not keep her long.
> What? I that kill’d her Husband, and his Father,
> To takers in her eyes her in her heart’s extremest hate,
> With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes… (1.2.228-32)

However, these lines are not meant to convey Anne’s frailty. In fact, given that they form part of Richard’s elaborate self-fashioning speech, they ironically confirm the helplessness of a woman without a man. Richard’s sardonic yet self-congratulatory “All the world to nothing/Hah!” (1.3.37-38) brings to the fore the exchange rhetoric of the period. Richard, ever the more resourceful manipulator with words, shows not only what he thinks of women but also what they are as social constructs. Hence, immediately after his coronation, Richard asks Catesby to spread the rumour “That Anne my wife is sick and like to die / I will take order for her keeping close” (4.2. 50-51). Catesby is also required to do two more things. First, he should find a foolish “mean-born gentleman” who will marry the
daughter of the dead Clarence. Second, something must be done to facilitate his own marriage to “my brother’s daughter,/ Or else my kingdom stands on brittle grass” (4.2.61-62). These lines once again highlight Richard’s master strokes that will secure his political position and have been interpreted in terms of his diabolic obsessions with defeating innocence. What such interpretations miss is the fact that his plot is a reflection not so much of diabolism as of the ease with which a man can dispose of women. Ironically, however, disposal not only involves murder, an evil and immoral end to a woman’s life, but also marriage, a socially sanctioned disposal mechanism to get rid of female rivals. Richard successfully uses women as tools and yet, never stops from talking about it. As suggested earlier, the drama of disposing of women is critiqued not by legitimising it but by highlighting the ease with which it can be done.

Thus women are used by different organs of state ideology, ranging from family to nation and empire. For them to effectively operate as tools they may be fashioned as idealized women—that is, wives, daughters, mothers, sisters—or as ideal subjects. As tools they are used by power structures against other people in a bid to enhance their power, by relatives to pursue political or sexual motives, or by lovers for their own sake. In these configurations, while women like Miranda and Ophelia act as helpless and passive tools, Isabella and Mariana offer resistance to no avail. Women who collaborate with men in their plots against powerful enemies are dumped when the project is over. Octavia and Blanche are extreme cases of women who are forced to shift from one extreme to another to
serve the men they trust, only to be dumped at the end. What is interesting is the
degree of compliance or willingness in these women to do as told. Whether they
like it or not, their acceptability—often conceived as social status—is directly
dependent on their utility. They are serviceable goods, useful and disposable, and
useful because they are disposable. It is difficult for such women to accept that
they were deceived not by fate but by the men they loved or trusted. They die or
disappear in ignominy, unless, of course, they are fit or willing to be
accommodated within the ambit of patriarchy. Interestingly, marriage and death
are the two recourses available to women, but what they choose is determined by
men around them.