



Women's Dowries and Marriages in Shakespeare's Plays

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Abstract—This paper explores the intricate relationship between women's dowries and marriages as depicted in Shakespeare's plays, situating the discussion within the context of the Elizabethan Age. It examines the role of fathers in securing dowries, the implications for prospective husbands, and the agency of brides themselves. While their views on dowries may differ, dowries do bring different outcomes (whether or not they can secure a successful and happy marriage) to different people, and these reflect the dependent social and economic status of the women in that period. While some characters like Cordelia and Helena manage to assert their value beyond material possessions, many others remain trapped in the socio-economic constraints of their time. As such, Shakespeare's plays serve as both reflections and critiques of the social structures that governed women's lives during his time, which can be used to supplement historical data.



Keywords—Dowry, Elizabethan Age, Marriage, Shakespeare's plays, Women's status.

I. INTRODUCTION

In reading Shakespeare's plays, one will inevitably notice a phenomenon that might be fashionable in today's society: marriage or pre-marriage contract. And one will be astonished at people's directness when negotiating the terms of the contract, especially regarding dowry in his plays. This paper will first make a survey of the studies in this field, then try to paint a literary picture of the dowry-marriage relationship in Shakespeare's plays, and conclude with some analyses of women's social and economic status in the Elizabethan Age.

Studies on dowry and marriage are mainly conducted from the historical angle and within an Italian setting. Molho (1998) explores the deception and marriage in Renaissance Florence, including in his paper the fact that the guardian of a young, nubile woman deposited Dowry Fund in the dowry insurance scheme office. Guzzetti (2002) talks about dowries in the fourteenth century Venice; Queller and Madden (1993) discuss the fathers, daughters and dowries in late Medieval and Early Renaissance Venice; Labalme and White (1999) explain how to and how not to get married in sixteenth century Venice. These three papers all mention the average and

highest values of dowry from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, especially the dowry inflation.

Pearson (1967) depicts the Elizabethan domestic life (including their marriages) with Shakespeare's plays as her main source of information. Ranald (1979) details the marriages portrayed in Shakespeare's four plays, among which dowry forms an important part. Simms (2016) specifically analyzes dowry in three Shakespeare plays, displaying that the dowry negotiations and agreements are the most important component of the patriarchal structure of marriage depicted in Shakespeare's plays. Jacobs (2001) intends "to compare and contrast the very different literary reactions to a common stimulus: the successive metamorphoses of the marriage law from the thirteenth century all the way up to the middle of the eighteenth." (p. vii) Bunker (2003) explores how Shakespeare and Middleton portray a range of patriarchal behaviors that related to marriage and money, especially the marriage-making negotiations and explicit financial considerations that affected inheritance practices and land distribution from the 1530s throughout the 1620s. Dynes studies the marriage and family in early Elizabethan drama, with Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* being a typical

example. Dolan (2011) focuses particularly on new research on rates of marriage in early modern England, on married women's agency, will, and work, and on same-sex attachments. They treat literary texts as their subjects, trying to depict the social realities reflected in literary works. However, their emphases are either on marriage law, or on marriage and family, or set in a limited number of Shakespeare plays. This paper will adopt the same approach, but focus on the dowry-marriage relationship displayed in a far larger number of Shakespeare plays and strive to provide a panoramic picture of the dowry system in the Elizabethan Age.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S DOWRIES AND THEIR MARRIAGES

Before our discussion begins, one thing must be made clear: although Shakespeare's plays are set in different milieus, like Italy, France and Vienna, they reflect the English matrimonial law in the Elizabethan Age. "What Shakespeare is doing, in other words, is transferring the English canon and civil law of marriage to Vienna without concerning himself with legal anachronisms." (Ronald, 1979, p. 78)

A dowry (in a broad sense) consists of two parts: the dowry (in a narrow sense) and the jointure. The dowry is an amount of money, goods, and property the bride brings to the marriage. It can also be called her marriage portion. The jointure is an agreement by the groom's family to guarantee specific money, property and goods to the bride if her husband dies before she does, aside from or in addition to what is in his will. Both parties in a marriage contribute to the dowry. Stone, a leading historian in the field of social and family history, believes that this dowry system "governed the structure of the English family at all levels of the propertied classes from the sixteenth century on through the nineteenth century." (1977, p. 88) This section will explore the relationship between women's dowries and their marriages from three aspects, namely, for the bride's father, for the future husband, and for the bride herself.

2.1 For the bride's father

It was the father's responsibility to provide dowries for his daughters, and "T[t]heir marriages would also depend on the dowries their father could provide". (Pearson, 1967, p. 211) "Among the most honorable deed in a noble man's life was providing for the proper marriage of his daughters. A noble father unable to provide suitable dowries would suffer dishonor, blame and embarrassment." (Queller & Madden, 1993, p. 704) Therefore, Stone (1977) believes, "the dowry system, and the cultural obligation to marry off the girls, meant that daughters were a serious economic drain on the family finances". (p. 89)

If a father died, it was the male family member's duty to prepare a dowry, as can be seen in *Measure for Measure*: Mariana's brother died at sea, and her dowry was lost. "This monetary disaster is perhaps just as devastating to Mariana, since without the promised family money, she loses her fiancé, the 'well-seeming' Angelo." (Tedrowe, 2003, p. 155) Spiro (2020) also concludes that their [Julietta and Mariana] marriages are delayed or cancelled because of complications with their dowries. (p. 101)

She should this Angelo have married; was affianced
to her by oath, and the nuptial appointed: between
which time of the contract and limit of the
solemnity, her brother Frederick was wrecked at sea,
having in that perished vessel the dowry of his
sister. But mark how heavily this befell to the
poor gentlewoman: there she lost a noble and
renowned brother, in his love toward her ever most
kind and natural; with him, the portion and sinew of
her fortune, her marriage-dowry; with both, her
combinate husband, this well-seeming Angelo. (III, i.)

In the royal family, the King, as a brother or uncle, usually provided dowries for his sisters or nieces. In *King John*, he gave his niece Blanch a huge dowry that "shall weigh equal with a queen" (II. i.) and married her to the French prince, Lewis, as a way to solve international disputes. In *King Henry VI*, 3, King Lewis XI agreed to marry his sister Bona to Edward, he said,

Then, Warwick, thus: our sister shall be Edward's;
And now forthwith shall articles be drawn
Touching the jointure that your king must make,
Which with her dowry shall be counterpoised. (III. iii.)

Clearly, there was a marriage contract concerning the dowry and jointure.

Accordingly, it was the father's privilege to bargain with his daughter's wooers for a higher dower or jointure. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the father Baptista was eager to get rid of his shrewish daughter Kate, he did not haggle over terms of the marriage contract. When Petruchio asked: "... if I get your daughter's love / What dowry shall I have with her to wife?" (II. i.), Baptista immediately gave a seemingly satisfactory offer: "After my death the one half of my lands, / And in possession twenty thousand crowns." (II. i.) Although Baptista did not ask for more, the wooer Petruchio gave a generous jointure:

And for that dowry, I'll assure her of

Her widowhood, be it that she survive me,

In all my lands and leases whatsoever:

Let specialties be therefore drawn between us,

That covenants may be kept on either hand. (II. i.)

Soon the contract was settled between the father and the wooer even without the daughter's being notified. But with his outwardly docile daughter Bianca, Baptista acted quite differently. "By weighing his daughter's beauty, age, and sex appeal, a father could establish the price for her hand based on what the market at the time would bear." (Tedrowe, 2003, p. 3) Since Bianca had more than one wooer, he decided to sell her marriage to the highest bidder:

Faith, gentlemen, now I play a merchant's part,

And venture madly on a desperate mart. (II. i.)

'Tis deeds must win the prize; and he of both

That can assure my daughter greatest dower

Shall have my Bianca's love. (II. i.)

From these few lines, we can conclude that, a dowry could be both a burden to and an opportunity for the father, depending on his financial status and whether his daughter was popular or not. In addition, provided that the dowry was properly settled, the bride's family could also benefit from her dowry. Just as Tedrowe (2003) said, "the bargaining he [Baptista] does for his daughters' dowry prices a direct consequence of one family's financial and social situation." (p. 254) "The father of the bride maintained or even gained additional honor or status by insuring that his daughters were properly dowered and married." (Queller & Madden, 1993, p. 704)

2.2 For the future husband

2.2.1 The larger dowry you have, the brighter your prospect of marriage will be

It is human nature to marry rich, so many examples can be found in this category. As in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio came purposely to look out for a wife, who, nothing discouraged by these reports of Kate's temper, and hearing she was rich and handsome, resolved upon marrying this famous termagant, and taming her into a meek and manageable wife. The following lines clearly displayed his intention and resolution:

... and therefore, if thou know

One rich enough to be Petruchio's wife,

As wealth is burden of my wooing dance,

Be she as foul as was Florentius' love,

As old as Sibyl and as curst and shrewd

As Socrates' Xanthippe, or a worse,

She moves me not, or not removes, at least,

Affection's edge in me, were she as rough

As are the swelling Adriatic seas:

I come to wive it wealthily in Padua;

If wealthily, then happily in Padua. (I. ii.)

In this same play, one of Bianca's wooer, Hortensio, when she proved unresponsive to his love, decided to settle for "a wealthy widow ... a lusty widow now, / That shall be woo'd and wedded in a day." (IV. II.) Notice that, in his mind, "lusty" and "wealthy" are interchangeable adjectives, equally belonging to the widow; nothing else is required to make her both desirable and attainable. (Jacobs, 2001, p. 141)

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio, who had already spent all his own money and hoped to pay off his debts by marrying an heiress, claims, "but my chief care / Is, to come fairly off from the great debts." (I. iii)

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, "from the beginning of his wooing, Claudio seems to be a young man with his eyes set on marrying a rich wife." (Ranald, 1979, p. 74) Before his wooing, he asked Don Pedro, "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" Don Pedro answered, "No child but Hero; she's his only heir." (I. i.) Then he confessed that he had liked Hero even before he went to war.

2.2.2. Dowry lost, marriage lost

In 2.2.1 we have talked about Mariana's example, here is another one from *King Lear*. When King Lear tested his three daughters' love toward him, he was dissatisfied and annoyed by his most beloved daughter Cordelia's answer, "... I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less." (I. i.) After beseeching Cordelia to mend her speech a little and getting no improved reply, Lear deprived her of all her dowry, and distributed it to his two sons-in-law, leaving with Cordelia her truth and pride as the dowry, "Let it be so; thy truth, then, be thy dower" "Cornwall and Albany, / With my two daughters' dowers digest this third: / Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her." (I. i.)

As Burgundy, one of Cordelia's wooer, learned of Lear's actions, he restated his interest in only what Lear had offered him. He still expected to receive Cordelia along with her dowry, "Royal Lear, / Give but that portion which yourself proposed, / And here I take Cordelia by the hand, / Duchess of Burgundy." (I. i.) As soon as Lear informed him that she no longer carried a dowry, he dropped the idea of marrying her and said, "I am sorry, then, you have so lost a father / That you must lose a husband." (I. i.)

2.2.3. "She is herself a dowry." (*King Lear*, I. i.)

Miracles sometimes did happen. The king of France, another wooer of Cordelia, rescued her from her misery after Burgundy refused to marry her, but only after speaking to

Lear. When he first heard of Cordelia's banishing, he thought that it was strange that the one who he loved the most would do something so monstrous as to be stripped of his benevolence. After speaking to Cordelia and listening to what she said, he realized that she had spoken the truth and still loved Lear the most. In his noble sense, he regarded Cordelia's virtues as the most valuable, and took her in.

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised!

Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon:

Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.

Gods, gods! 'tis strange that from their cold'st neglect

My love should kindle to inflamed respect.

Thy dowerless daughter, king, thrown to my chance,

Is queen of us, of ours, and our fair France:

Not all the dukes of waterish Burgundy

Can buy this unprized precious maid of me. (I. i.)

The same thing happened in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Fenton was first attracted to woo Anne by Page's money, as he himself confessed, "thy father's wealth / Was the first motive that I woo'd thee, Anne". However, his seduction took a strange turn, when he came to realize that Anne was "of more value / Than stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags; / And 'tis the very riches of thyself / That now I aim at." (III. iv.)

In *All is Well That Ends Well*, upon hearing Bertram's refusal to marry Helena, the king declared: "If thou canst like this creature as a maid, / I can create the rest: virtue and she / Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me." (II. iii.) Obviously, in the king's eye, Helena's virtue was her own dower.

2.2.4. For the sake of securing dowry

In *Measure for Measure*, Claudio and Juliet's marriage contract was a "true" one (I. ii), but "their consummated contract is a union that in English law would be valid but irregular, arising from a 'true contract' *de praesenti* made in secret between the lovers, but not ratified by public ceremony *in facie ecclesiae*." (Ranald, 1979, p. 78) Due to the lack of public ceremony, Claudio was considered to have committed fornication, therefore was imprisoned and nearly sentenced to death. Why did he risk his life by not getting married? The fact was that Claudio and Juliet were to be married, but problems with Juliet's dowry delayed the wedding. They wanted to secure the safety of her dowry, lest it should be deprived of as happened in Cordelia's case, if her friend was not in favor of their marriage.

Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract

I got possession of Julietta's bed:

You know the lady; she is fast my wife,

Save that we do the denunciation lack

Of outward order: this we came not to,

Only for propagation of a dower

Remaining in the coffer of her friends,

From whom we thought it meet to hide our love

Till time had made them for us. (I. ii.)

2.3 For the bride herself

Although it was mainly the father's obligation to prepare a dowry, the bride herself could win a dowry for herself. In *All is Well That Ends Well*, Helena, confronted with the huge gap in both social and financial status between her beloved Bertram and herself, was determined to rely on herself and take advantage of the king's disease,

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,

Which we ascribe to heaven: the fated sky

Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull

Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. ...

... The king's disease--my project may deceive me,

But my intents are fix'd and will not leave me. (I. i.)

She cured him with her father's special prescription and demanded a special gift from the king: a husband. The king let her choose from his noble bachelors,

Fair maid, send forth thine eye: this youthful parcel

Of noble bachelors stand at my bestowing,

O'er whom both sovereign power and father's voice

I have to use: thy frank election make;

Thou hast power to choose, and they none to forsake. (II. iii.)

On hearing Bertram's refusal, the king offered her a noble fame and a huge dowry that was at least equal to Bertram's estate,

If thou canst like this creature as a maid,

I can create the rest: virtue and she

Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me. (II. iii.)

Take her by the hand,

And tell her she is thine: to whom I promise

A counterpoise, if not to thy estate

A balance more replete. (II. iii.)

With her determination and the help of this dowry and the king, she finally obtained her marriage.

In this same play, Diana won herself a dowry by helping Helena to gain her conjugal rights and finally get

her husband back. But Diana's willingness to help came from Helena's generous offer and her trustworthiness.

Take this purse of gold,
And let me buy your friendly help thus far,
Which I will over-pay and pay again
When I have found it. (III. vii.)
... after this,
To marry her, I'll add three thousand crowns
To what is passed already. (III. vii.)

Apart from Helena's offer, the king also told her to "Choose thou thy husband, and I'll pay thy dowry." (V. iii.)

III. SOME INFERENCES FROM THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S DOWRIES AND MARRIAGES

While it is an endless and arduous task to address women's economic and social status, this paper will make some tentative inferences about it from the above-discussed relationship between women's dowries and marriages, as a corroboration of previous research literature and supplementary data to historical ones.

3.1. Women's economic position

In the patriarchal household, it was the responsibility of the male family members to provide dowries for the female members. So a woman was dependant on her father or brother(s) for dowry before marriage, and her husband or father-in-law for jointure thereafter. As quoted in 2.1, "daughters were a serious economic drain on the family finances." (Stone, 1977, p. 89) And in order to build and keep large landed estates intact, or to be exact, to protect patrilineal identity, landowners preferred to give their daughters cash (usually installments) and moveable goods as dowries rather than land. Chamberlain (2002, p. 76) argues that "it is threat of patrilineal loss, ..., which haunts the text of *King Lear*." "For with her marriage, Cordelia carries away English land and with it obscures Lear's patrilineage." (ibid, p. 182) Hence his love test and Cordelia's being deprived of dowry. Although a woman could win herself a dowry by her virtue, her good deed, or her intelligence, as in Helena's and Diana's case in *All is Well That Ends Well*, these were just few exceptions. Even so, they were relying on the king to give them dowries. And "any emphasis on romantic love as an incentive for marriage was, at least for the underprivileged classes, complicated by the severe economic depression of the last decades of the sixteenth century. The inability to raise money for dowry portions left many couples unable to wed as they desired."

(Dynes) A case in point was Mariana in *Measure for Measure*.

Whereas a woman had few means to contribute to her dowry, she was supposed to have her dowry and jointure at her disposal. But this was not always true. During the marriage, she was said to have this right, but as early modern culture was resolutely hierarchical, with women, no matter what their wealth or rank, theoretically under the rule of men, then actually she had little freedom to dispose her property. Legally, a woman's identity was subsumed under the protection of her male protector; "In early modern England, 'woman' was articulated as property not only in legal discourse but also in economic and political discourse. Economically, she is the fenced-in enclosure of the landlord, her father, or husband." (Stallybrass, 1986, p. 127) "Once married, the bride had no legal control over her money, portables, or land that she brought into the marriage." (Bunker, 2003, p. 26) An example of this belief was expressed in *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Petruccio, newly married to Katherine, claimed "She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house, / My household stuff, my field, my barn, / My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing" (III. ii.)

Stone (1977) maintains that, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a woman's dowry or marriage portion "went directly to the father of the groom, who often used it himself as a dowry in marrying off one of his own daughters." (p. 88) Chamberlain (2002) also found that "T[h]e marriage portion was then used by the groom's family to provide for its daughters, to pay debts and to purchase land." (p. 171) An example can be seen in *the Merchant of Venice*, where Bassanio hoped to pay off his debts by marrying an heiress: "but my chief care / Is, to come fairly off from the great debts." (I. iii)

This can also be further illustrated by the work women can do in the society. During the marriage, "Women often held considerable power within their own households, overseeing the labour and education of their children and servants – as does Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Women did venture out in public, asbut this is perhaps where Shakespeare is most conservative, for he limits his representation of women's economic labor to that of household servants, tavern-keepers, bawds, and prostitutes." (Traub, 2003, p. 131) In *All is Well That Ends Well*, Diana's mother, the widow, was a tavern-keeper; in *Measure for Measure*, Mistress Overdone was a prostitute and also a bawd.

After the husband was deceased, the wife fully owned her dowry and jointure, and "could hope to enjoy equality in disposing of her person or property". (Palliser, 1992, p. 73) She could choose to remarry or to stay in widowhood and enjoy her wealth. In the Elizabethan time, many widows

chose the latter. In Shakespeare's plays, there were altogether more than thirty widows, only eight remarried. In *Measure for Measure*, after disclosing Angelo's hypocrisy and cruelty, the Duck deprived him of all his possessions and bestowed them to Marina, as a way to test her love and sincerity, "And choke your good to come; for his possessions, / Although by confiscation they are ours, / We do instate and widow you withal, / To buy you a better husband" (V. i.) This can be seen as another attestation of women's economic dependence on men. Since women had few means to make money, and the jointure was the only money a wife was automatically entitled to from her husband's estate, it would be safe for both the father and husband to ensure the money needed for her later life.

After her death, her property would go to her heir or go back to her parental family; if her husband survived her, then part of her dowry would go to him. This can be regarded as a way for women to contribute to family and society, but it simply cannot alter her social status

3.2 Women's social status

Stone (1977) claims that within the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century family, "marriages were arranged by parents and kin for economic and social reasons with minimal consultation of the children." (p. 117) Examples of this kind abound in 2.1, among which Blanch in *King John*, Bona in *King Henry VI, 3*, and Cordelia in *King Lear* proved to be "useful in cementing political connections". (Ibid, p. 89) Being a dependant and a tool, women enjoyed no social status.

As to what constituted suitability for marriage, Pearson (1967) finds that emphasis was placed upon "equality in rank, age, and worldly possessions." (p. 297) As discussed in 2.3, Helena in *All is Well That Ends Well*, tried to bridge the huge gap both in social and financial status between her beloved Bertram and herself by relying on the king's bestowal, who, on hearing Bertram's refusal, offered her a noble fame and a huge dowry that was at least equal to Bertram's estate.

A woman could inherit her father's property, but not his rank and fame, as W. R. Dynes puts, "the economic and political rhetoric fashioned women as essentially symbols of either their husband's or their father's position and possessions, capable of transmitting status between the generations but unable to enjoy it themselves." Her social status was mainly decided by her chastity. "Chastity ... was, after a woman's economic position, the most important determinant of her social status." (Traub, 2003, p. 130) "In all social classes a woman's chastity was her chief dowry", "chastity had taken on the value of property." (Pearson, 1967, pp. 216; 284)

The ideology of chastity, constraints against female

speech, and women's confinement within the domestic household are summarized by the phrase "the body enclosed", which refers simultaneously to a woman's closed fanny, closed mouth, and her enclosure within the home. (Stallybrass, 1986) In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the reason for Katherine's difficulty to get a husband and her father's eagerness to get rid of her was her shrewish words and behavior. This represented a threat to the masculine society, thus she must be tamed. Barbaro writes in his treatise *On Wifely Duties*: "It is proper ... that not only arms but indeed also the speech of women never be made public; for the speech of a noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs." (Ibid, p. 127) Then it is easy to understand why Portia must be disguised as a man to appear in court; Olivia, to serve her beloved Duke; and Rosalind, to go into exile.

Women's chastity, defined as virginity for an unmarried woman, and monogamous fidelity for a married woman, has always been the plot of Shakespeare's play. In *All is Well That Ends Well*, Helena boasted of her virginity before the royal bachelors, "I am a simple maid, and therein wealthiest, / That I protest I simply am a maid." (II. iii) In *Hamlet*, Laertes warned his sister Ophelia about Hamlet's intentions:

Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain,
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmaster'd importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire. (I.iii.)

Much Ado About Nothing can be the representative of this type. On the marriage ceremony, Hero fainted after being wrongly accused of infidelity by her betrothed, Claudio, who desired not just to break off his engagement to her but to humiliate her. This was taken for dead, which was welcomed by her father who claimed that "death is the fairest cover for her shame / That may be wished for" (IV. i.). Claudio did not express grief for her death until he was compelled to do so, and then marked his repentance by submitting to marry a "copy" of Hero sight unseen, insisting that he would do so even "were she an Ethiop" (V.iv.), one of many references in Shakespeare to a racialized standard of beauty. When, at the end of the play, Hero emphasized that a part of her had died – "One Hero died defiled" – she acknowledged that something was irreparably lost even as the lovers were reunited. It is another Hero if not another Claudio who got married now, and she came to life by the restoration of her chaste reputation. In this play, Hero's alleged crime, according to

Dolan (2011), “was only a felony – a crime punishable by death – for queens” in the 16th and 17th centuries. “It was not legally, morally, or socially clear exactly what one should or could do with a woman who had sex outside of marriage. What happens to Hero might be viewed as wishful thinking: a woman who is unchaste would simply drop dead.” (p. 629)

Among the married wives, Alice in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was envied and suspected by her husband Master Ford, who, after learning of Falstaff's intrigues to seduce her, immediately disguised as Master Brook, designed a plan to induce Falstaff to attempt his wife's virtue, and even provided funds for him. He complained about “the hell of having a false woman” (II. ii.), as he believed that uncontrolled sexuality represented a threat to social order.

Among widows, as mentioned before, in Shakespeare's plays, only eight, out of more than thirty widows, remarried. Keeping the wealth was one reason, remaining chaste might be the other. A widowed wife should stay loyal to her late husband by not getting remarried and devoting herself to the rearing of children and the maintaining of household. If not, her fate would be doomed to death or misfortune, as happened to Shakespeare's eight widows. Gertrude's remarrying Claudius, was noted by all people at the time for a strange act of indiscretion, or ruthlessness, or worse. Hamlet condemned his mother, “you have my father much offended.” (III. iv.) Disturbed by the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius, She drank up a bowl of poisoned wine the king had prepared for Hamlet, and immediately died.

Despite all these voices, we did hear few different ones. As discussed in 2.2.3, “She is herself a dowry”, two noble men and the king did utter some respect for Cordelia's, Anne's and Helena's virtue. And Portia was appreciated by men for her intelligence. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Baptista employed two schoolmasters to teach his daughters, “for I know she taketh most delight / In music, instruments and poetry, / Schoolmasters will I keep within my house, / Fit to instruct her youth.” Although his purpose was mainly to raise their prices in marriage bargain, surely there existed an emphasis on women's education. This displayed a rising concern for a woman as a human being, not just as an ornament, a dependent, or a property.

IV. CONCLUSION

By surveying existing scholarly work on dowries, particularly those focused on historical and Italian contexts, this study aims to provide a nuanced literary analysis of how dowry negotiations reflect the social and economic status of women in the Elizabethan Age based on Shakespeare's plays. While individual characters like

Cordelia, Helena, and Diana demonstrate the potential for agency, the prevailing societal structures often limited their choices and freedoms. This exploration of women's roles highlights a complex tapestry of economic dependency, societal expectations, and emerging individualism. Shakespeare's works serve as a critical lens through which these themes can be examined, revealing both the constraints placed on women and the subtle ways they navigated their social realities. This duality reflects broader societal tensions regarding gender, power, and identity, making it a rich area for further study and discussion.

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