

Feminism in the Works of Shakespeare

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Abstract – 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.

Keywords: Feminism, Women, Character

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INTRODUCTION

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.

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.

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 assess 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.

FEMINISM IN THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

In Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, Juliet Dusinberre admires 'Shakespeare's concern ... to

dissolve artificial distinction between the sexes. 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 reflect 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 makes 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 femininity 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 was also very common back in Elizabethan England, to compel women 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 women 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.

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, wedding 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 marriage ability 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.

DISCUSSION

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 program 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.

CONCLUSION

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.

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