

TIMELESS TREASURE OF WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

Shakespeare's plays, both comedies, and tragedies are perfect specimens of art and literature. On the surface, they seem to be structured by issues like love, jealousy, hatred, wars, intrigues, human failures, and fallings. The present paper intends to investigate the portrayal of women in Shakespeare's major plays in light of deconstructive feminism. Shakespeare's plays have been examined by a host of critics from different angles and perspectives but very few critics have studied these plays from a deconstructive feminist point of view. So, still, there is space and scope for initiating a study to examine the portrayal of women by Shakespeare in his plays. It also intends to explore the place and rights of women as they are portrayed in Shakespearean plays and also their relevance in modern society. Consequently, the readers and audiences of these plays come across with very submissive and conventional women who subscribe to patriarchal values into. The diversity in the nature of women in Shakespearean plays reflects the divergent socio-cultural trends of the late 16th and early 17th century. This study is based on the exhaustive text analysis and interpretation of six plays of Shakespeare in the light of feminism. These plays are The Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night, As You Like It, Othello, King Lear, and Romeo and Juliet. The main hypothesis of the study is that though Shakespeare does not project or promote any particular ideology or agenda, so far as the portrayal of women is concerned, he still is on the side of patriarchy and his plays strengthen and support the patriarchy and patriarchal values.

Keywords: Literature, Shakespeare, Feminism, Deconstructive, Patriarchy, etc.

Introduction:

Dating back to the dawn of human civilization women have been the focus of many literary works and portrayed by society as objects of desire. Literary and historical scholars affirm that women did not enjoy political, economic and social parity with men during Shakespeare's time. And thus, the plays of Shakespeare can be used as a looking glass upon the acts of Renaissance society.

Female characters play a significant role in the dramatic run of events in Shakespeare's plays. Just as in reality, Shakespearean women have been bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. Patriarchy is the ideology of the superiority of men as strong, decisive, rational, capable and competent beings (Tyson, 2007). It presents women as emotional, weak and irrational. Ultimately, it relegates women to a cultural wasteland where they can not make any meaningful contribution to society.

Even though the Queen herself was an unmarried woman, the roles of women in society were extremely restricted. Single women had been the possessions of their fathers and handed over to their husbands through marriage. In this period, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men. However, within this deprived, tight and organized scope for women, Shakespeare has represented them in his plays in most diverse ways.

The construction of Shakespeare's female characters reflects the Elizabethan image of women in general. For all that, Shakespeare supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of genders but many of his female characters exercise a rather great deal of subtle forms of power and influence and Shakespeare often does so in unusual and even subversive ways that challenge traditional gender roles. His plays are full of resourceful and self-confident women who create their own space and achieve or represent spirited independence. There are several different female personalities in Shakespeare's plays who assert themselves in very different ways.

Rosalind in *As You Like It*

Rosalind is one of the most famous of Shakespeare's gender-bending women. When her uncle the Duke banishes her, she stands up to him, 'asking what the hell?' He responds, 'I don't trust you!' to which she stubbornly protests, 'yet your mistrust can not make me a traitor'. He won't relent so she decides to cut losses and leave.

Rosalind does not, like Imogen, escape the enforced social reality of marriage at the end of her journey; yet she does actively direct the main actions of the play. However, she must assume a male identity in order to control the events of the play. This is because a woman, especially a talented woman, cannot be trusted: "Those (women) that (Fortune) makes fair,

she scarce makes honest; and those that she makes honest, she makes very ill-favored" (1. I. 37-38). Rosalind's disguise seems to reflect the fact that women's talents are actuality a liability because they are women. Otherwise, why can she not accomplish her goal dressed as herself? The inference is that a woman does not possess any power as a motivator of events. Moreover, Rosalind changes her mode of dress not only because of her lack of credibility as a female and her fear of danger in the public arena but because she is ostracised of being the daughter of a rightful Duke.

Viola in Twelfth Night:

Viola, the ideal woman of the play, is as strong and independent as a man without compromising her feminine identity. She dresses as her twin brother after they lose each other at sea. It was very dangerous for a woman to be on her own, so Viola dresses as her brother to enable her to find work and provide for herself. She continued her deception because she fell in love with Duke Orsino and wanted to stay close to him. Dressed as a boy seems to embolden Viola, and allows both her and the Duke to show their true characters as they fall in love.

It is the mystery of how life's energy makes what is otherwise a stifled performance come alive at the last minute. Viola's fake identity of Cessario the strong man will consolidate with her real identity of Viola the constrained female to produce Viola the heroine.

She occupies the role of a 'strong female' as shown through her divergence from the stereotypical roles prescribed to the women under Elizabethan ideology. She controls much of the action of the play, displaying a level of self-awareness not reached by her male counterpart. For example, by assuming both a male and a female role Viola earns the marriage of the man of her choice. The notion of identity itself is seemingly "disrupted to display a difference with subjectivity and the singularity that resides in this difference" through Shakespeare's depiction of this strong female character who shows that dominant ideology can, in fact, differ from actual social practice.

Portia In The Merchant Of Venice:

Portia is a unique locale with her position as a single incredibly wealthy female without a male reigning over her. Although she has her father's will prohibit her choice of marriage-Portia remains a character with fierce autonomy and an astonishing sense of self.

Portia is typically lauded as a feminist in a male-dominated society; however, the opposite view can also be taken. Portia's most prominent moment as a successful, intelligent, rational female comes in the courtroom scene when she is dressed as a man. What would be a moment of success for feminine wit and wiles instead is transformed into the opposite? Portia must don a cloak of masculinity in order to speak in the courtroom that much is clear. The

Venetian court system did not allow female lawyers, nor was there educational institutions in place that allowed this as well. However, Portia, as a female, takes it upon herself to 'fix' the problems that men cannot fix, taking any credit.

Portia is shrewd and calculating and does not exhibit similar characteristics of other female characters in Shakespeare. It is difficult to label her as a feminist because her destiny is firmly in the hands of the patriarchal system around her and instead of fighting the system, she manipulates it for her own self-interest.

Juliet In Romeo And Juliet

Individuality is the enemy of any routine system such as the one instated by patriarchal rule. Whether male or female, all have a pre-conceived part to play according to strict rules laid down by societal norms. The stifling of individuality also stifles any possibilities outside of marriage that a character like Juliet may aspire to. Juliet is a headstrong and intelligent character. She is considered by many to be the real hero of the play, acting as a sounding board and a balance against the impulsive Romeo. Juliet lies and clandestinely subverts her family wishes, a truly rebellious action against traditional Italian society.

Juliet's need for independence, however, is so great that she risks losing a reliable husband and a solid financial and social future. In fact, she sacrifices her life in order to assert her independence. The romantic notion that Juliet risks all simply because she favors one lover over another is an underestimation of her sense of self. Her need to assert her own choice in the face of her family's and society's denial becomes more important than life itself.

Desdemona in Othello:

Loyalty to patriarchy and marriage before oneself is captured by Desdemona's divided duty between her father, Barbantio, and her husband, Othello. Desdemona is the prototype of womanhood. She is charming, symbolizing the women ready to face the unknown of marriage being lured into a mystery that surrounds her husband. Desdemona's time is consumed by her duty as a wife and daughter leaving little for anything else. Othello, dominant and jealous, is not the best husband. He loves Desdemona, but he is easily turned against her based on Iago's insinuations.

Once Othello witnesses Bianca's outburst over Cassio's request for her to copy Desdemona's handkerchief, he infers the worst and launches into a rage. Desdemona, whom he claims to love perfectly, dies because she cannot convince her husband of her innocence. The insinuations of Iago carry more weight than the protests of the innocence of Othello's beloved Desdemona. This suggests that men trust the word of other men more than that of the women they claim to cherish.

Cordelia In King Lear:

Shakespeare begins “King Lear” with a display of Cordelia’s individuality: ‘I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less’ (1. 1. 94-95). The tragedies of both father and daughter are foreshadowed when Lear responds not with empathy but with a show of power on his own behalf. The king, noting the decline of his own fortunes, wants to assure himself of a worthy heir. Cordelia’s failure to assure Lear of her loyalty is her downfall. Her choice of honesty over flattery is misconstrued by Lear as a show of disrespect. The daughter in following her own instincts does not follow traditions held sacrosanct by her father and his male-defined culture. Lear’s sudden response suggests disgust with her daughter. By attacking Cordelia’s beliefs and renegeing his responsibilities as an understanding father, he sets in motion a series of destructive events. He rather limits Cordelia’s role in the world.

Even though Cordelia is initially ostracized by her father, she later shows compassion in Lear's hour of need. Is she still deferring to him? In Cordelia's first interchange with Lear, he selfishly chooses to defend his royal and paternal image while Cordelia is opinionated, defiant. In their final interchange, when Cordelia could have continued to show an independent attitude, she chooses empathy instead. As is the norm in Shakespeare, Cordelia's acting out of the traditional role takes precedence over her own needs and beliefs. Her magnanimous attitude toward a father who was antagonistic toward her independence all along shows that since Lear cannot change, she must, in order to make peace: patriarchal rule and feminism cannot be reconciled.

Cordelia's compassion for her father is an acknowledgment of her personal failure. Her empathy shows us that a woman cannot be independent without being perceived as heartless. More important, Shakespeare's story shows a woman making a choice is a direct threat to the patriarchy. Cordelia, in the end, reunites with her father who now is more powerless than she ever was. Her choice to be caring toward the dying Lear rather than vindictive is not a tribute to Shakespeare the feminist: it is a tribute to Shakespeare the humanist and his belief to human kindness over ambition

Conclusion:

The analysis of these texts is a small endeavor to dive into the ocean of Shakespeare's women. All these women take actions which are beyond what is acceptable within their social roles as women. Mere triumph or victory is not their main concern: they are not driven by a lust for power. These women risk losing everything to their attempt to achieve their basic right to control their own destiny. There are a lot of women who face the same risks in what is still a male-dominated world.

We know while Shakespeare had a deep sensitivity toward women, we can not say that he was a feminist as we define the term today.

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