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SHAKESPEAREAN WOMEN: A PRODUCT OF AN ERA HE DID NOT FAIL TO QUESTION

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Abstract

Many female characters, especially young ones, appear in the Shakespearean drama; and women, with regard to issues like marriage, attire, position, and conflicts, in Shakespeare's plays have been discussed by many critics, who have studied Shakespeare as one of the most important playwrights during the Renaissance in Europe, if not the most important one. One of the most significant questions that Shakespearean scholars have raised regarding his female characters is whether he was misogynistic, internalizing the assumptions about women the English Protestant society at the time had, or a playwright who was able to play the role of an intellectual, and develop a critical eye through which he looked at his hierarchal society and environment. Considering the historical background found on Early Modern England, the era and society when and where Shakespeare lived and wrote, this study examines Shakespeare's attitude towards Women, focusing on his depiction to his female characters, who are usually young maidens, with respect to the way he shows them as being in love, getting married, and cross-dressed characters. In conclusion, female characters in several Shakespearean tragedies and comedies, like *Othello's* Desdemona, *The Taming of the Shrew's* Katherine, *The Merchant of Venice's* Portia, and *Twelfth Night's* Olivia will be shed light on in this study as female members of the patriarchal Protestant society in the Renaissance, an era where women were not socially indeed equal to men, as the Christian belief of the time suggested, yet where there was also a liberal movement and liberal voices that started to appear and look critically at the assumptions associated to gender, where women were considered as the inferior party.

Key words: Early Modern England, Protestant marriage ideal, misogynistic assumptions, crossdressing.

Methodology

The study is an analytical observation of the status of some of Shakespeare's female characters, which depends on the historical background

available on the Early Modern Ages and Renaissance England. The positions and tragedies of several young women Shakespeare depicts will be discussed with accordance to the social and political hierarchal

order that dominated the English society during the rule of Queen Elizabeth 1 and King James the first, who both ruled England when Shakespeare lived and wrote. Thus, there will be a reference to *Hic Mulier* and *Haec -Vir*, for example, which are two main pamphlets where women and womanhood of that era are discussed.

Introduction

Discussing Shakespeare's attitude towards women necessitates referring to the historical background and cultural outlook within which he wrote, just as it is the case when someone intends to discuss any other issue the Shakespearean drama pops. The Early Modern era in England was one of eruptions, especially during the eighty years from 1559, when Queen Elizabeth 1 was ascended to the throne until 1640, when the Puritan Revolution and the English civil war began (Oktem, 6). There was a need to emphasize the existing authority and a fear of the collapse of the hierarchal order, especially with regard to the fact that the state with its military power and army was not yet altogether established; and *order* in this regard means the social system that was based on class and gender. Based on the historical background at hand and Shakespeare's plays themselves, I am going to argue that regarding women, Shakespeare was, first, a product of a certain culture and time; and second, an intellectual dramatist who did not fail to question the social and political order under which he lived, and which was based on gender and class hierarchy.

Discussion

During the Early Modern Ages, the English society started to witness a cultural shift mainly due to the economic transformation from a land or property- based ownership, which had made an aristocratic society, to a middle-class society, where not blood, but the money someone earned specified their position or place in society. In periods of such changes, where social mobility took place (Howard, 422), it was important for the monarchs as well as the Puritans, or the conservatives in general, to maintain the existing social order and hierarchy, which was based on class and gender. One of the most significant issues that appeared at the time, and which was understood as a threat to the class

and gender hierarchy was cross-dressing, that, by its various conditions, revealed a kind of struggle in this respect (Howard, 418). This was because someone's clothes made an essential part of his/ her identity in terms of class and gender, upon which the social hierarchy was based, as just mentioned, where there was an analogy between obedience to the king/ queen and God and obedience to the patriarch within the family; i.e, the father or husband. Women who cross-dressed were thought to be losing the feminine characteristics assigned to them by the Protestant ideology and God, such as chastity, silence, and obedience. In other words, "to switch coats is to undo the work of heaven" (Howard, 422).

Several treatises and pamphlets were written about the nature of women and womanhood at that era, and the two main pamphlets among those were *Hic Mulier* and *Haec -Vir*; which "attacked and defended cross-dressing respectively" (Howard, 420). The former one emphasized the notorious image the Protestant society at the time associated with cross- dressed women: that they were sexually incontinence, where prostitution was also an accusation (Howard, 424, 420) for which a cross-dressed woman was to be punished. Worth mentioning here that women's sexuality during periods of the aforementioned changes and transformations of the social organizations was something that the patriarchal Puritan society needed to keep under control, and that maintaining a difference between the genders was something important for that society, because the social hierarchy in the Renaissance needed "the idea of two genders, one subordinate to the other" (Howard, 423). This gave an importance to the appearance, or clothes in keeping a difference between men and women. The later pamphlet, on the other hand, *Haec- Vir*, and in defense of cross-dressing, suggests that the subordination women showed in the Early Modern Ages is not something natural, but a part of that society's custom; that is, how to be a man or a woman was something learnt from the society; and that "custom is an idiot" (Howard, 428).

Jean Howard also addresses the question of the role of women who cross-dressed: did they work in the service of patriarchy or that of the subversive

figures of that patriarchy? She suggests that they did work for the service of patriarchy, yet that there still were some of them who showed possibilities for female power, allowing changes in the gender system, which subordinated women, to take place in Early Modern England (Howard, 430). This was particularly the case as a result of the new inventions and technologies that period saw, like printing, which enabled women to read and write (Howard, 427, 428).

Applying this answer about the role of cross-dressed women during the Renaissance to theatre in general, and the Shakespearean theatre in particular, Jean Howard argues that this latter can be looked at as a supporter for women's containment, and thus, for the hierarchical gender system through some of its characters on the one hand, while as a revealer to the unnaturalness of this system on the other hand (Howard, 431). For example, In *Twelfth Night*, we find that the cross-dressed woman who dislikes the fact that she needs to cross-dress, and thus, to be in the position of the higher sex, Viola, is depicted as the "good woman" who at the end gets married to the duke of the city, Orsino; yet that the uncross-dressed one who is wealthy, strong, and independent is shown as a woman who needs to be disciplined, because she makes a threat to the gender hierarchy, contrary to Viola who never makes a threat to that order, especially as the audience is aware that she is a woman. Olivia, who does not have any patriarch to control her except for her uncle, Sir Toby, who is a sympathetic drunken funny figure that does not have any authority over her, is punished in the play by falling in love with a female, Viola, which makes a humiliation for her (431, Howard).

Addressing the question of the naturalness of women's position as the subordinate party that was unallowed to have certain positions or jobs, for example, Howard discusses the character of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Whereas *Twelfth Night's* Viola uses her disguise as a "means of survival", or a "psychological haven" (Howard, 431), Portia disguises in order "to enter into the masculine arena of the courtroom" (433), and shows to be very convincing in her performativity and "more than competent" for a work that was assigned exclusively

to men. By Portia playing the role of the lawyer Balthazar, Antonio is secured (Howard, 433). Portia's disguise and achievement would probably make the audience question the naturalness of men's and women's roles in the English society, a question which could lead to the answer of those roles being no more than customs, something which people learn in the society, not something created by God.

However, the fact that women in England during the Renaissance not only cross-dressed, but also walked in the streets of London and went to theatres in great numbers unaccompanied by men, wore clothes that they opened over their breasts, and went to churches; in other words, the fact that the place of women in that era stopped being houses, undermined the role of theatre in making a social change. Beyond the analysis of the theatrical texts of the dramatic works, the actual practices, or what was going on in the society was also significant in terms of the cultural change that was taking place at the time. It was even a more significant change than a change Shakespeare's cross-dressed female figures could signify on the stage (Howard, 440). This leads me to say that Shakespeare and his theatre were a product of the cultural outlook and organization that prevailed in England at the time, where what was written of conduct literature was a reaction to the cultural change, to women's resistance and their protest against the patriarchal society, rather than it being a reflection of what was going on there. Worth mentioning here that theatres then became a sort of business where people paid to watch plays, and where Shakespeare and other dramatists became rich.

Nonetheless, it cannot be deniable that Shakespeare was also critical to the hierarchical gender system and order of his time and culture, where James the first asked the preachers of London to speak against cross-dressing from the pulpit (Howard, 420, 428), as it was a practice of protest against the order, and where the Protestant revolution, and though emphasized that men and women are spiritually equal in the eyes of God, required subordination from women to their husbands or fathers, and stressed that a good woman is a silent, obedient and chaste one (Krontiris, 18). *Othello* and *Taming of the Shrew* are

two plays of William Shakespeare in which he questions the social order and the Protestant marriage ideal which places women in a lower position than men, where their role within marriage was to server, whereas that of men was to govern (Krontiris, 31).

It is true that the couple we find in Othello try to do a revolutionary action by getting married, yet the heroine dies as a result of her courageous, forward character which is considered to be a threat to the patriarchal society, represented by both Desdemona's father and her husband. The former dies of grief as a result of his daughter's disobedience and audacity, where, throughout the play, we are always reminded of the fact that her marriage takes place without his consent (Rose, 147, 148). The latter, however, turns to be a murderer as a result of the misogynistic assumptions that he internalizes from the Christian society within which he lives in Venice. Iago, trying to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity or adultery, reminds him of her marriage to him without her father's consent, to which he refers as a deceit (Rose, 149). This makes Othello become suspicious of Desdemona's liberal character (Rose,149), after he had loved it in her at the beginning, besides his lack of self- confidence as an alien to the Venetian society- an Othello or black. Shakespeare in this play reveals the tragic consequences that result from the contradictory nature of the Protestant marriage ideal which subordinates women while claiming they are spiritually equal to men (Krontiris, 19). Mary Beth Rose suggests that drama in the Jacobean period enabled us to see what happens when such contradictions are acted out (Rose, 95). Through Desdemona, Shakespeare, in other words, gives us a very sympathetic and courageous character of a lover woman who is considered to be fickle, weak, and wicked because of her gender in a Christian patriarchal society, where all women were born to get married while being chaste maidens, and their sexuality is controlled (Rose, 144, 145).

Shakespeare's shrew, Katherine, is another sympathetic character who is shown as a victim to the patriarchal society. She is a maiden given by her father to her husband in a marriage of a mercantile nature where the father marries off his daughters to

that who pays more money (Khan, 90). In her "The Taming of The Shrew: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage", Coppelia Kahn argues that the comic nature of the play refutes the claim that Shakespeare shows a misogynistic imprint in it. The exaggerations that we see in the relationship between Kate and Petruchio, where her subordination to him is irrational and illusionary, makes the audience question the nature of the Protestant marriage which "defies reason" (Kahn, 96). For example, Katherine agrees on everything that Petruchio says, even when he demands her to agree that the sun is the moon (Kahn, 96). To prove that Shakespeare depicts Kate as a victim with whom the audience supposedly would sympathize, Kahn, throughout her article, depends on the facts that the play is very comic. First, she points out to the fact that Katherine is a young maiden being sold in marriage (which enables us to see her actions as revolutionary to the oppressive patriarchy), rather than being a married woman, who was the typical shrew in that society (Kahn, 90). Second, she touches upon the motif that Katherine and Petruchio are lovers indeed (Kahn, 97), where they both understand the playful and mercantile nature of the Protestant marriage, which makes Kate only yield at the end and accept whatever funny orders her husband demands for (Kahn, 94). This untrue acceptance certainly does not show her identity, a thing that can be easily proven by the exaggerated length of her speech at the end of the play, which shows her true talkative identity, Kahn remarks (Kahn, 98, 99, 102).

Conclusion

In conclusion, William Shakespeare lived in an era that saw a significant transformation and cultural change in the English society, as a result of the change in the economic system of that society as well as the two main movements that took place at the time: the Protestant Reformation and Humanism. We can even say that the world as we know it today had its roots in the Early Modern Ages. Maintaining the order which was based on gender and class hierarchy where obedience was learnt within the family, and obedience to the king/ queen or God was analogous to obedience to the husband or father, was a chief concern in that society. This

social organization resulted in a protest by women, who cross-dressed, walked at London's streets unescorted and unaccompanied by men, and watched plays at theatres in big numbers. As a product of his time and place, Shakespeare sometimes showed powerful independent women to be a threat to the masculine supremacy and hierarchal gender system which was analogous to the political order, just as we see in a character like *Twelfth Night's* Olivia who is punished and humiliated by falling in love with a woman, and perhaps much more obviously in Cleopatra, whose sexuality and desirability emasculated a great Roman commander and was a true threat to the Roman Empire, where she dies at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Through other characters, however, Shakespeare proves to be looking with a critical eye at the patriarchal order under which he lived. We can see this in sympathetic characters like Desdemona and Katherine, who are depicted as victims of the patriarchal order and Protestant marriage ideal; and in a character like Portia, whose competence for a position that was assigned only to men makes the audience question the naturalness of that order, and probably leads them to answer that it is not the "work of heaven" (Howard, 422), or nature that gives the two genders their social positions and roles, but the social custom.

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