



FEMININE SENSIBILITY AND POWER OF WOMEN AS DEPICTED BY SHAKESPEARE IN HIS DRAMATIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on women in universally acknowledged author William Shakespeare who was not of Elizabethan age but of all ages who united the powers and advantages of three great forms, the romance in verse or prose, pure poetry and drama. It also focuses on the Shakespeare's women who are not an isolated phenomenon is their emancipations their self sufficiency and their evasion of stereotypes by which he realized that most of the significant questions had to do with beliefs about the nature and positions of women as well-defining and apparently impregnable as the principles of the Ptolemaic universe.

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare, the Elizabethan dramatist, is generally called 'the soul of the age' and universally acknowledged as "the applause, delight and wonder of the stage". In the words of Ben Johnson, Shakespeare was "not of age but of all ages" there is no denying the fact that he has powerfully expressed the spirit of his age. However, he is called "the very epitome of mankind" for he has dealt with the archetypal emotions, aspirations and truths of human nature transcending the barriers of time and space. One critic has pointed out that Shakespeare represents the prophetic soul of the wide world dreaming of the times to come. The facts which encompass the entire world become his subject matter and his characters are universal in their application and appeal. As regards his characterization, Edward Albert writes, "in sheer prodigality of output, Shakespeare is unrivalled in literature. From king to

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clown, from lunatic to saint and seer, from lover to misanthrope-all are revealed in the hands of the master". Sheaves of his expression have passed into common speech, possessing a great deal of sweatness, strength and flexibility.

Whoever reads Shakespeare's play cannot but be impressed by their singular excellence. His superiority to all other English writers lies in the fact that he has united the powers and advantages of three great forms-the romance in verse or prose, pure poetry and drama. The first one gives him the variety, elasticity, freedom from constraint and limit. The second enables him to transport while the third one at once preserves his presentations from the excessive vagueness and vastness which non-dramatic romance invites and helps him to communicate actuality and vividness. His characters are real beings of flesh and blood speaking like real men, not like the author's and his plays are nothing but expressions of passions. His language is known for its aptness and quotability. He has magic power over words-"they come winged at his bidding-and seem to know their places".

Shakespeare is also so deep and many-sided as life, and thus it requires great courage to feel, face and understand him. In fact, the only way to know him is to completely submit to his overwhelming power. The miracle is not in the abstract thoughts his works contain but in that extraordinary pliability which let him put the most divergent, most striking and most ingenious arguments in the mouths of his characters in support of their passions or interests. Genius makes almost anything respectable, and the emancipation of Shakespeare's heroines has long been relished by the most conservative husbands and fathers, and the most clinging wives and daughters. But there is more of Shakespeare's feminism than the conjuring up of a few highborn heroines in trousers on to the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. Shakespeare wrote for a society more hospitable to the rights of women than any since Mary Wollstonecraft's in a London chivvied by Puritan propaganda about the position of women. Shaken by the female pistols swaggering in breeches and sighing for the days of an Amazon Elizabeth I who had been nurtured on the humanist ideals of women's intellectual equality with men. Shakespeare women are born with the most fascinating freak of them all, the boy actors. Shakespeare who emancipated women have sisters in the plays of his contemporaries and explored the nature of women from a feminist point of view.

Feminism is a protest against launched by women of the west for equal social, political, legal, moral, culture rights with men. "Feminism challenges the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex and belief that her place is in the kitchen. It assumes the equality of the sexes and seeks to achieve for women a role in society which such equality warrants". This has led to a rethinking on gender relations reflected in literature and life" (Abraham 20). The repression and suppression of women from immemorial is to trace to the gender relation. Feminism is nothing but the study of gender relation and the analysis of male domination. In the words of Rosalind miles, "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears



to man” (P 3). As many Wallstone craft has put it, “The minds of women are no different from the minds of men, but that only men and women differ in their bodies. Women become silly creatures because the goal of their education is to lure a man. A system based on one’s sex’s dependence is demeaning to everyone” (preface i). In the words of Helene Cixous, “From the beginning of time, oppression was the common lot of woman and the labourer. Woman was the first human being that tasted bondage, woman was a slave before the slave existed” (P 1).

The feminism of Shakespeare time was largely unrecognized and the struggle for women’s rights was thought of as primarily a nineteenth century phenomenon which has been intermittently resurgent ever since. The modern women’s movement claims to be new in working from a wider context of deeply ingrained attitudes to woman, instead of fixing itself to a limited political goal as earlier militants like Mrs. Paukhurst. But this stinking at cultural assumptions about women is not something new. The ideology, the literature, the social reform, the activism and the increased awareness necessary to all of them dominated the society for which Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote their plays. It is to be authentically said that the Renaissance was a period of intense questioning about women and their attitudes. Shakespeare was no doubt, born at the height of the English was identified as a ‘protestant nation’. The protestant ideology inaugurated new attitudes to women and coalesced with the practical concern of Humanities like more and Erasmus to reform women’s education. The aristocratic women round the court certainly evinced constant proof of more’s contention that women were the intellectual equals of men. Aristocratic women in English in the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century enjoyed an emancipation comparable to that of aristocrats like Vitoria Colonna in Renaissance Italy. For them, the battle for recognized equality with men had been fought and won. Shakespeare know that the tough intellect behind the raillery of the court ladies in **Love’s Labour’s Lost**, or of Beatrice and Rosalind, or behind the self-awareness of Helena in ‘**All’s Well that Ends Well**’ had plenty of basis in real life.

In many ways, Puritanism was at its most exciting stage during Shakespeare’s time. The Puritans exerted a widespread influence on attitudes towards woman popularizing with their multifarious oratorical and literary talents, the new ideals about marriage and by pressing for reform of inhumane marriage customs in a middle-class context and refusing to tolerate the double standard for adultery. Their reforms were aimed at men and women equally but their effect was greater for women because they alienated the exploitation made possible by the economic dependence of the woman. Thus, the agitation for women’s rights and for changed attitudes to women which was to a large extent set in motion and furthered by the most powerful pressure group, both numerically and morally of the time and one which had the moral support of the most talented and creative of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. This was the climate into which Milton was born and in which Shakespeare took root as a dramatist.



Shakespeare's women are not an isolated phenomenon in their emancipation, their self sufficiency and their evasion of stereotypes. The women in Morston's plays share many of their characteristics. Shakespeare's are different only in the degree of his aristocracy. Hazlitt called Shakespeare's playwrights 'the scale by which we can best ascent to the true knowledge and love of him and claimed that admiration of them increased and confirmed our relish for him' (Smith 322). This is true of Shakespeare's attitudes to women. Women in Jacobean drama was always played by boys. The presence of one boy actor in the secular drama of character and personal relations spurred the dramatists were in a unique position foe condemning and exposing false literary attitudes to women whether satirical or romantic. The dramatists were in an ideal situation for championing the image of life of woman-especially the individual woman and her status in the society. To champion women against literary men who forced stereotypes upon them was to reinforce their own position and make it stand for positive values. The drama was a popular form and the protagonists for liberal attitudes to women in the crudest terms stood for the virtuous bourgeois against the corrupt aristocrat.

Women took the veil, men became the months and Catholic ideas about virgins, wives, widows and subjection prevailed without protest. The ferment about women in Shakespeare's society provided such stimulus to the dramatist's art and craft. Shakespeare and his contemporaries could rely on their audience's alertness to controversy about women. Shakespeare realized that most of the significant questions had to do with beliefs about the nature and position of women.

Donne said, "I call not that virginity a virtue' which resideth only in the bodies integrity" (P 346). The exaltation of chastity in women, in medieval thought or in the ethical mores of the Victorians, demanded virginity. To denote the chaste of women is to upgrade the whore and this implies coming to terms with realities of what women are like and of what virtue in women consists of it is not a label attendant on the physical condition of virginity. The divorcing of chastity from physical virginity had important consequences for attitudes towards women. The ideal of chastity in women symbolized by the Virgin Mary, adulated by the medieval church and exalted in the literature of country love is a mystique rather than a definable and limited attribute. The exaltation of chastity in women, in medieval thought or in the ethical mores of the Victorians demanded virginity. This mystique of chastity in women suffered eclipse in the Renaissance to the same extent as the mystique of honour in men. In the ethics of courtly love, honour is to man as chastity is to a woman.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries wanted to do more than simply venerate chastity. Luther had preached that the sexual impulses of men and women were essential to nature's good ordering of society. Without women, society itself would perish. Nature gives man nothing superfluous to his needs. When the clown in All's Well That Ends Well asks the countess of



“My Poor body, madam, requires it, I am driven or by flesh, and he must need to go that the devil drives” (sc-I, Act-III, 26).

There were many answers possible to Adriana’s demand in **The Comedy of Errors**, “why should their liberty then ours be more?” Luciana chose the political and quasi-philosophical response that women must take their place in the chain of degree below men. To go a step further back the justification is theological God gave Adam authority over Eve as a penalty for the Fall. But the reformers could not help perceiving as Hill perceived two centuries later, “that the subjection of the wife saluted not abstract truth but the superior physical strength of the husband” (Mill 230) Adriana upbraids her husband and she sends for a rope’s end. Their extolling of the first marriage with which God completed his creation was not consistent with the concept of a subject and inferior wife. Such a being would have been a liability to Adam, not an asset. When the reformers declared for marriage rather than celibacy, Eve was reinstated as the good wife of God’s gift, given to Adam, ‘to consummate and make up his happiness” (Galaker 9).

In **The Training of the Shrew**, Kate inhabits a world too sophisticated to stomach the Du Bartas theology of subjection with which her forbear, the Kate of the anonymous. The Training of the Shrew regales her hearers. Shakespeare’s Kate is political,

“I am ashamed that women are so simple To offer war where they should kneel for peace or seek for rule, supremacy and way when they are bound to serve, love and obey” (SC-II, Act-V, P-160)

The household was the microcosm of the state and women’s subjection a happy paradigm of civil order. The cause of women’s rights is the poor relation of democracy. The puritans reached the conclusion that marriage would work best if a wife offered her husband voluntary submission out of and in return for love but on the way there they opened a Pandora’s box of suggestion. A husband could not expect the gift of submission regardless of his own behavior. The drama of Shakespeare’s time exposes the idea of reciprocal obligation. Fallibility is no longer an exclusively female birthright.

Shakespeare’s theatre offered a consistent probing of the reactions of women to isolation in a society which has never allowed them independence from men neither physically nor spiritually. The struggle is not about the issues-the Gods and the state-it is about what Virginia woolf called “The Angel in the House” (P 285), the male idea of womanhood. The dramatists took the concept of a man’s domination over his wife and daughters and explored what it was like to be a woman under these conditions. The interplay between breaking free and submitting to the male world’s view of woman inseparable from the characters of women



as deperate as Goneril, Helena in ‘**All’s Well That Ends Well**’, Portia in **The Merchant of Venice** Lady Macbeth in **Macbeth**.

Tragedy is supposed to deal with the isolation of the human spirit and one of the reasons for the Elizabethan and Jacobean preoccupation with heroines is that isolation is more terrible in a being conditioned to dependence on men. Lady Macbeth, for ever recreating in her sleep-walking the inception of her separateness from her husband still reaches for his hand. But Shakespeare’s comedies evince the same fascination with women on their own from the solitary sorrow of Julia in **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**, watching her lover court another woman, to Viola communing with her disguised self, ‘How will this fadge?’ (Twelfth Night SC-II, P 33), to Helena and Hermia, alternately exiled from the trio of complete lovers in **A Midsummer Night’s Dream**.

Freedoms of conscience for women was still a new concept. Portia, Viola, Beatrice are women set free from their voice is that of the adult world. Beatrice free to make her own choice is free also to dictate the conditions of that choice. She will not marry till God make men of some other mettle than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be over mastered with a piece of valiant dust to make an account of her life to a cloud of wayward mer!?! (Much Ado About Nothing –i, ii, 48). Women in the drama want to be married but not to be mastered, and this levels them with men who have always lamented loss of liberty in marrying. As Bacon pointed out, “the most ordinary cause of a single Life is Liberty” (Bacon 29). The boast of liberty is a male prerogative where the spinster plucks with bony fingers at ever-receding sour grapes. But where Benedid and Beatrice both sound the hollowness of single liberty, the relinquish it only because they are confident of liberty within marriage.

For providing permanently light relief to serious men, to be in essence, a symbol of that light relief in one’s very being, women are allied with professional fools as Shakespeare perceived when he depicted the peculiar sympathy between his folls and his heroines- Celia and Touchstone Viola and Feste, Cordelia and The Fool in King Lear. Thou art a fool, scoffs Duke Frederick to Celia when she defends Rosalind: ‘she robs thee of thy name’ (As you Like it 80). The values of women and fools are an irritant to men and their function is to antertain, not to ensure but as critics, they are not dangerous because they have no power. The pleasure which the puritans felt a man should find in his wife did not arise from gratification of the senses. Their interpretation of pleasure was more comprehensive Barnaby Rich described the ideal wife! ‘A man that wanted a friend for pleasure, a servant for profit, a counselor to advise him, a helper to assist him, or a spiritual instructor to inform him, a good and virtuous wife doth supply all these occasions” (P 2). When Shakespeare allowed Juliet to articulate passion in terms of property he pointed out her innocence of a world in which love was subordinated to property:



“O, I have brought the mansion of a love but not possessed it; and though I am sold Not yet enjoyed” (Romeo and Juliet 26).

The Elizabethan wives enjoyed a working equality with their husbands which made foreigners declare them to be more liberated in practice than women in any other country (William 8).

In Shakespeare’s comedies, women reach out to the world of audience when men are contained and sharing the perplexity with the audience or Portia displaying her talents as actress as well as her acumen as lawyer. It is not a community of sympathy confined to plays in which the heroine is disguised. Women are by nature watchers in a world ruled by men and the power of Shakespeare’s heroines over the male world in the comedies comes from their detachment from it, their standing aside from its assumptions. The women in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* or *Love’s Labour’s Lost* are in some spectators of the idolatry directed towards; them and their independence of the idolater’s image of the bridges the gulf which idolatry ordains between the world of men and the world of women.

To conclude, Shakespeare is said to have inherited ideas about women as well-defining and apparently impregnable as the principles of the Ptolemaic universe. Shakespeare’s feminism consists of more than a handful of highborn emancipated heroines: it lies rather in his skepticism about the nature of women.

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