



CHAPTER II

Shakespearean Variations of the Female

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Introduction

Shakespearean females are almost as popular as Shakespeare himself. And they have remained as the most prestigious roles for actresses since the time they were produced. What makes Shakespeare's women so significant, on the other hand, is that they are more true to life than real women. In most of his plays where females hold an important part, Shakespeare has been able to transform 'artifice' (the products of his craft) into a 'reality' that reveals a higher truth than females that exist in flesh and blood.

This talk will be devoted to the discussion of the various types of female characters Shakespeare has produced in his drama. To avoid misleading interpretations concerning Shakespeare's characterizations, however, it would be wise to start with a warning by Professor Terence Hawkes, who, in his book titled *Meaning By Shakespeare* points out that we can have no objective access to an "essential" Shakespeare, to the "plays themselves," or to what they "really" mean (1992: 146). (By this he means that there is no sure way of mastering all that Shakespeare has produced in his dramatic texts.)

All the same, it would be necessary to note that the truth concerning Shakespeare's females is embodied in the texts themselves and can most safely be studied in terms of the information these texts provide. In short, Shakespearean females are stage figures that come to life only within the process of a close reading or a theatrical performance. Therefore they are not open to speculations that real people like us would be subjected to in true life situations.

Transition from the Feudal Woman to the Modern Female

For the sake of coming up with a neat presentation, I have arranged my discussion of the Shakespearean female upon three coordinates: 1) That his women are the products of a male-dominated world; 2) That Shakespeare was nourished by humanistic ideals of the Renaissance; 3) That Shakespeare's analysis of the female is mostly worked out through characterizations based on binary oppositions that inversely relate one character to another.

Shakespeare's premodern England represents the slow passage from a feudal world to a modern one. Shakespeare has portrayed not only typical feudal women bound up by obedience to the male, but also females that have been going through the painful process of becoming modern women, who are free to decide about their lives.

Discussing gender, family and society in the early modern period in England, Russ McDonald states that it was taken as axiomatic that men were superior to women, not only because Eve was created out of Adam's rib, but also because greater physical strength was – perhaps - associated with greater intellectual capacity and more profound capacity for feeling (1996: 252). In supporting his point he mentions "An Homily of the State of Matrimony," a sermon read from the pulpit during the Anglican church service at the time of Queen Elizabeth's and King James' government. This sermon defines women as 'weak creatures,' not endowed with 'strength and constancy of mind: "She is 'the weaker vessel; she is of 'a frail heart...'" (qtd. in McDonald 1996: 280). In short, the female was the inferior sex and needed the guidance of the male.

It followed that, because they lacked the intellectual and physical power to cope with what was going on in the essentially male world, the normal occupation for women was marriage and motherhood. Men were the masters and women were their helpmates. In her stereotyped role, the woman's space was limited to 'the home,' the only place where she had control over things. Outside the home stretched a man's world of 'action' she was not allowed to share.

At this point we should keep in mind the contradiction that while in Shakespeare's time, the generally accepted model for the ideal woman was that of the loving and obedient wife, the good mother and house manager, England was on its way towards becoming the leading country in Europe under the rule of Queen Elizabeth, a mighty female with a powerful mind. This double standard concerning the definition of women did not seem to disturb the male-dominated world, however, so long as the wives were kept where they ought to be.

Juliet Dusinberre points out that “in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, freedom of conscience for women was still a new concept. Women had not been educated to form independent moral judgements. Dramatists asked themselves how the female conscience would work” (1996: 93). It is exactly at this point that Shakespeare the humanist starts his enquiry concerning the status of woman as a physical and social being that can compete with the male in aspirations, mental capacity, ability for moral choice and effective action. And he has come up with a good number of portraits that not only represent the time they were created in but also reveal the ways of the universal female.

Love and Marriage/Love in Marriage

The rising power of monarchy in Elizabethan England promoted marriage and family life as the greatest guarantee for a well-founded society. The long-lasting feudal principle for a marriage arrangement – as still prevalent in many parts of the world- was the consent of the father, who, as we find in the words of King Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who warns Hermia against protesting her father's choice of a husband for her:

To you, your father should be as a god:
One that compos'd your beauties, yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure, or disfigure it. (I. i. 169)

We observe that in this play and a good many other plays Shakespeare raises a protest against this kind of patriarchal attitude. Contrary to the general practice in his society, he has undertaken the task of portraying women that long for a marriage based on the mutual consent of both the male and the female.

The most ideal condition for such consent was love. Throughout his career as playwright, Shakespeare has promoted romantic courtship that leads to a happy marriage and children that would carry the images of their parents from generation to generation. This was perhaps Shakespeare's only solution to man's most tragic defect - his 'mortality'.

The female characterizations in most of the early plays like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1591)¹ are sketchy in that they are either treated as objects to be offered for marriage to whoever gentleman who wants them, or as virgins who secretly pursue the men they love under a male disguise. As early as *The Taming of the Shrew* (1591), however, we also find the Shakespearean protest against marriages arranged by fathers. The two sisters Katharina and Bianca stand in binary opposition to each other in that Bianca is the good natured, obedient daughter, who has soon found her match, while Katharina, the shrewish elder sister, rejects the idea of giving in to the ways of the male-dominated world. It is only when she realizes that Petruchio - first her suitor, then her husband - truly cares for her that she agrees to become a proper wife.

The process of domestication that Shakespeare makes Katharina go through in this early comedy, however, is in no way acceptable by humanistic or feministic standards and luckily will not be repeated in later plays. When, a few years later, Shakespeare writes *Comedy of Errors* (1594), whose plot he has borrowed from Plautus' *The Manaechmi Twins*, he replaces the shrewish wife in the original play with two young females, Adriana, the married woman who demands the love and attention of her husband, and Luciana, the unmarried sister, who, while blaming her sister for violating the feudal norms of a proper wife, ends up with a happy marriage based on romantic courtship.

The female sketches in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594-95) give us Shakespeare's first humanistic glimpses of how female wit outwits that of the male, with four young ladies imposing upon their suitors -so as to test their constancy in love - the life of a hermit in absolute seclusion for a whole year.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), the action is based on the violation of the feudal rules of marriage. Hermia goes against the will of her father and that of King Theseus so as to get united with the man he loves. Helena is in hot pursuit of the man of her choice. In spite of the pressures of the male-dominated world, the two young females are on their way to get what they want. In this play, Shakespeare also sets up a binary opposition between the practices of a male-dominated society and that of the supernatural world, by focusing on the fact that in human society even females with mythological dimensions like Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons, are forced to put up with the male authority of kings like Theseus and - when necessary - their violent acts, while, in the supernatural world

1 The chronology for the plays have been taken from the Everyman Shakespeare editions (London: J.M. Dent, 1995; Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995).

King Oberon can get what he wants only by playing clever tricks on his queen Titania.

Shakespeare contrasts the different attitudes of the royal female in *Richard III* (1592-93) by drawing a binary opposition between Lady Anne, Richard's wife-to-be, and Queen Elizabeth, the widow of Edward IV, in the two parallel 'Wooing Scenes,' one at the beginning, the other towards the end of the play. In the earlier scene Lady Anne is portrayed as a typical feudal female, who, unable to survive without the protection of a powerful male will be ending up in misery, while Elizabeth – acting on behalf of her daughter- in the second, manages to outwit Richard and ward off the traps he has laid.

In *Measure for Measure* (1603) Isabella, who is about to take an oath for religious devotion is torn between losing her virginity and saving her brother Claudio from execution. With the help of the Duke of Milan disguised as a priest, she manages to smooth out the problems that stand on her way. Yet, whether, the Duke's last minute proposal of marriage that she cannot possibly refuse, pleases Isabella or not, is left to the choice of the stage-director. For the reader, however, it strikes an unpleasant cord, because Isabella remains absolutely quiet in this scene that ends the play.

The contrasting attitudes between conventional couples whose marriage arrangements are made by their elders and those who need the support of romantic courtship for an ideal marriage abound in Shakespearean comedy and are climactic in *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598). In this play, Claudio and Hero represent the stereotypes of the conventional couple whose marital concern is limited to establishing a proper match, while in the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice romantic courtship is skilfully masked by witty dialogue, one of the greatest linguistic examples of the 'war of the sexes,' until the couple realizes that their love is mutual.

That romantic courtship is most ardently desired by women and that - unlike Romeo and Lysander, who excel in wooing - males usually fall short of finding proper ways of expressing their feelings, has been shown in two comedies. In *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night* (1601), in which, through the two young females disguised as males, Shakespeare provides for us a masterclass in romantic wooing. Rosalind (disguised as Ganymede in the former play) teaches her loved one Orlando how to approach the girl he loves. Viola (disguised as Cesario in the latter play) woos Olivia on behalf of Count Orsino. Her wooing is so effective that, Olivia, thinking she is a man, falls in love with Viola. Luckily Viola's identical twin brother, Sebastian is to appear soon and marry Olivia. Viola's share in this game of love is Orsino, whom she has been infatuated with since the very

beginning. In both plays, it is through the romantic endeavours and tricks of the female that the hard cores of the patriarchal world are cracked and marriages based on the woman's choice are made possible.

Women achieving an equal status with men are shown in two other comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-7) and *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604-5). In *The Merchant*, Portia starts as a victim of the patriarchal world, who, upon her father's will, is doomed to be the 'prize' for the suitor who chooses the right casket. Then she enjoys the good fortune of being won by Bassanio, the man of her choice. Next, in trying to free Bassanio's friend Antonio from Shylock's clutches, she assumes the guise of a lawyer and enters the male world by making use of the knowledge she has received from a male professional. Her success with Antonio's case in the guise of a lawyer enables her to trick her husband-to-be into remaining loyal to her all his life. Her promotion from the helpless virgin treated -by her father- as a weakling who cannot make her own decisions, into a woman who demands the absolute loyalty of her husband is by all means admirable. Yet, the way she adopts the cruelty of the male world in her ruthless treatment of Shylock leaves an unpleasant impression on the audience.

In *All's Well*, on the other hand, Helena begins by practicing the art of curing illnesses that she has learned from her deceased father. Upon curing the king of France, she is to be awarded by what her heart desires most. Her choice is marriage with Bertram, which award the King readily grants. Thus, by adopting the practices of the male in a patriarchal society, Helena upsets the whole social scale and upgrades the position of women. Yet the mentality behind forcing a man to marriage makes her as unpleasant a woman as a man forcing a woman to marry him. In fact, Bertram, who does not love her, tries in vain to avoid her by going to war. (Helena in *All's Well* is one of the earliest dramatic characters that stand in line with Bernard Shaw's philosophy of the Life Force. Contrary to romantic medieval or Victorian assumptions, the female, in terms of this philosophy, is the 'pursuer' and the male is the 'pursued' in the game of love.)

Moral Judgement and Sense of Morality

Shakespeare's most striking early experiment with the female mind and heart is seen in his portrayal of Juliet, the heroine of *Romeo and Juliet* (1595). The violation of the authority of the male-dominated world in this play leads to tragedy. At the very beginning, Juliet aged 14, is presented as a typical feudal girl in full obedience to her parents' wishes. When Lady Capulet, who, commissioned by her husband, informs her of young Paris' proposal of marriage, she readily

complies with it, assuring her mother that when they meet, she will look at Paris in order to like him. She says:

I'll look to like if looking liking move:
But no more deep will I endart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly. (I. iii. 705)

In this short reply, we first see the obedient daughter who will do her best to please her parents and her suitor. That she is a well brought-up young lady in terms of the norms of the male dominated society is also clear from her comment that she will control herself while looking at her suitor, for it is not proper for a decent female, to gaze too deeply into the eyes of a young man. Yet, within those three lines, Shakespeare also makes it clear that no matter how closely Juliet represents the ideal picture of a feudal virgin, she is by no means an idiot that would believe that 'love' comes by looking with the eyes of parents.

That Juliet is not a typical feudal female soon becomes clear when she meets Romeo at the party that very night and after their first dance allows him to kiss her twice. From that point on, even when the young lovers find out that they are the children of two families that hate each other, Juliet behaves like a free woman who fights for her heart's desire. In spite of patriarchal restrictions that surround a daughter's life, she secretly but bravely marries 'her enemy' and spends her wedding night with him in her own chamber. Her soliloquy that comes before Romeo's arrival as her husband, is clear proof that in a few hours she has been transformed from an obedient daughter of a patriarchal family into a hot lover waiting passionately for the night to come and bring to her 'her Romeo':

... Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaways' eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalked of and unseen.
[...]
Come gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo ... (III. ii. 715)

Juliet remains the loving female till the end of the play. She openly goes against the hasty marriage arrangement with Paris, by even defying her father's threat of physical violence. She is brave enough to drink the potion that would make her look dead and finally, when she sees Romeo lying lifeless in her arms

when she wakes up some hours later, she does not hesitate to stab herself to death. Her constancy of mind in sticking to her choices and her courage to die for love attains for her the rank of tragic heroine.

Ophelia in Shakespeare's later tragedy, *Hamlet* (1600-1601), can neatly be contrasted with Juliet in that throughout the play she remains imprisoned within the rules of patriarchal society. Unlike Juliet who has achieved her freedom of choice at the cost of her life, Ophelia simply obeys her father Polonius and her brother Leartes, who warn her against losing her virginity in case she welcomes Hamlet's advances. Hamlet in turn projects his resentment concerning his mother's marriage to his uncle, upon poor Ophelia by his biting remarks on the inconstancy of women:

Hamlet : [...] Are you honest?
Ophelia : My lord?
Hamlet : Are you fair?
Ophelia : What means your lordship?
Hamlet : That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should
admit no discourse to your beauty.
Ophelia : Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than
with honesty?
Hamlet : Aye, truly; for the power of beauty will soon
transform honesty from what it is, to a bawd than
the force of honesty can translate beauty into its
likeness. [...] If thou marry, I'll give thee this plague
for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice and pure as
snow, thou shall not escape calumny.
Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell. [...] To a
nunnery go; and quickly too. Farewell! (III. i. 812)

With her father dead, her brother far away, and Hamlet sent to England, Ophelia is left alone in a patriarchal world without male guidance and intervention. She slowly goes mad and begins to express her suppressed sexuality in her songs. She dies a virgin -the pathetic victim of the male-dominated world.

In contrast to Ophelia's deplorable position, Hamlet's mother Gertrude has been endowed with the luxury of enjoying the life of a female as an object of desire in a patriarchal society. She fully obeys the man-made rules of her society and derives pleasure from the love and protection she receives under the wings of

a male. Although these two females stand on opposite poles of womanhood, they are similar in that they can easily be manipulated by males and that – unlike King Claudius who is a clever man- they are mentally too shallow to try to understand Hamlet’s mind and heart and attribute his words and behaviour to his presumed madness.

Desdemona of *Othello* (1603-4) presents another variation of the feudal female in that, like Juliet she defies the rules of her society and disobeys her father by marrying the man of her choice. Yet, in marriage, no matter how light-heartedly spoiled she may appear in her behaviour towards her husband, she seriously assumes the role of a feudal wife and remains a loving, obedient woman to the point of even accepting death from the hands of Othello. Desdemona achieves the quality of tragic heroine by bravely paying the price of the choice she had made.

The position of Lady Macbeth in the tragedy of *Macbeth* (1606) represents Shakespeare’s most important test-case study of the conventional outlook on women in his time. For once, the discussion at hand is not concerned with female virginity, girls seeking love in marriage, women’s constancy, the female as a shrew or one competing with the male in a patriarchal world. This time Shakespeare is on his way to investigate the female’s ‘sense of morality’ and mental capacity for moral choice.

We find that throughout the play Lady Macbeth remains within the Elizabethan and Jacobean concept of women. Shakespeare traps Lady Macbeth in her stereotyped role as female, as wife, mother and helpmate to the male in the male-dominated world, and observes the outer and inner experience she goes through.

We observe that even the all-important function Lady Macbeth serves in making her husband the monster he turns out to be, is associated with her role as a loving wife who has devoted her life to Macbeth’s happiness. In assuming the task of making him king, Lady Macbeth believes that she can put up with acts of violence prevalent in the male world to which she is a stranger. Falsely assuming that an act of violence can be handled as a simple household chore, she finds out only too late - after Duncan’s death - that murder is by no means a domestic affair. She slowly goes through a process of spiritual recession that extends towards her sleepwalking scene and her eventual death. Her ‘sense of morality’ has not allowed her to survive the trauma caused by what she has done.

Juliet Dusinberre notes that Macbeth’s tragic mistake is to try to rise above his status as a human being. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, rejects “her

womanhood to make Macbeth a man. [...] Seeking to become more than a woman, she becomes less than one” (1996: 284). As Howard Felperin points out, “Lady Macbeth cannot fully become the fiend she tries to be” and “her eventual madness is the index of the very humanity she wanted to negate” (1987: 102). She leaves the stage as a ‘pathetic figure’ who has valued manhood above womanhood and has failed to consider humanity as the essential quality upon which the virtues of both sexes depend. Macbeth’s awareness of what it is to be a human makes him a tragic hero. Lady Macbeth’s ignorance of what it is to be human, on the other hand, does not allow her to become a tragic heroine.

All the same, when we contrast her with General and Regan, the elder daughters in *King Lear* (1605-6), who are totally deprived of any sense of morality, our sympathy for Lady Macbeth deepens. For she remains within the moral matrix of humanity as she has fully experienced the horror of what she has done and she has paid the price.

You must have noticed that Shakespeare’s female characters taken from history or myth have not been included in the discussion that I intend to end at this point. They are perhaps the subject of another talk.

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