

SHAKESPEAREAN BREED OF FEMINISM: CHARACTERS OF PORTIA, CORDELIA AND LADY MACBETH

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ABSTRACT:

The corpus of study in the present paper is concentrated upon Shakespearean breed of feminism as enunciated through female characters of Shakespeare's plays in general; whereas particularly it centres around the portraiture of Portia in "Merchant of Venice", Cordelia in "King Lear" and Lady Macbeth in "Macbeth." Many of the female characters in Shakespeare's plays are endowed with pluck, mettle and power. Shakespeare created these female characters in an age when women were not allowed to perform on stage and all the female roles were being enacted by male characters. The concept feminism did not exist in his life time for approximately three hundred years following his death. Women in Shakespearean plays have always had important roles, many a times the leading roles. Whether they create the main conflicts and base of the plays or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions, they are put in challenging situations. Very often they surpass their male-counterparts. Here attempts have been made to perceive Shakespeare's women on contemporary attitudes. Whether they are mothers, ingénues, unruly or ambitious women, they are all women discovering how to find their way in the world which is a pretty tough world. At many places Shakespeare's women want the same things as the men. Shakespeare wrote his ladies to be fierce, fascinating, multifaceted and fun characters which are more than a lot of 21st century feminists can claim. These female characters serve as a guide to Renaissance women, teaching them to be strong, independent intelligent and yet still wisely conform to the system presenting a uniquely Shakespearean breed of feminism.

KEYWORDS: Renaissance, Patriarchal setup, Puritan Ideals, Strong women, Adhering to norms, Reforming system from within

INTRODUCTION:

Feminist literary theory has evolved according to the needs and demands of the International Women's movement. This women's liberation was initiated in the 1960s by women to voice their grievances. By the late 60s and 70s feminism had emerged as an important political force in the Western

World. Feminism reveals and challenges the cultural shaping of gender roles in all social institutions like family, work, politics and religion. Feminist criticism examines how female experience is portrayed in literature.

In Elizabethan time, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience. All these virtues, of course, have their meaning in relationship to men. The role allocation in Elizabethan society was strictly regulated; men were the breadwinners and women had to be obedient housewives and mothers. Single women had been the property of their fathers and handed over to their future husbands through marriage. However, within this deprived, tight and organized scope, women have been represented in most diverse ways in Shakespearean Drama. Shakespeare's plays are full with resourceful and self-confident women, who create their own space and achieve or represent a spirited independence. There are several different personalities in Shakespeare's plays, who assert themselves in very different ways: Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Viola, Rosalind, Desdemona, Portia, just to mention a few of them. The corpus of study in the present paper particularly centres around the portraiture of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Cordelia in *King Lear* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*.

As mentioned earlier Renaissance society did not traditionally value the freedom of women. There were only two socially acceptable positions for Renaissance women, marriage and entering a convent. The upbringing of middle and upper class girls stressed the teaching of household management skills and the feminine values of chastity, obedience, and silence. It is wonderful that in such a male dominated society Shakespeare portrays a defiant, intelligent and subtly overpowering character like Portia. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is introduced as a uniquely strong heroine who is responding to the confines of Renaissance society. Portia is portrayed as the ideal woman who is beautiful and obedient while retaining her strength and independence, who serves as a guide to Renaissance women, teaching them to be strong, independent, intelligent, and yet still wisely conform to the system, presenting a uniquely Shakespearean breed of feminism. Traditionally, Renaissance society viewed the family as a mini-state, containing the same hierarchal structure as the government in order to be harmonious. This system was based on an order where men were the heads of households, and women were considered to be naturally subordinate. At the same time Puritans believed in spiritual equality among the sexes, questioning the old Catholic doctrine of female subordination. They began to attack traditional Renaissance customs such as forced marriage, marriage for money, child marriages, and marriages between very old men and young women. This was an attempt to create the ideal marriage and, thus, eliminate adultery. Puritanism was a major factor in Shakespearean feminism.

Portia is portrayed as the ideal woman by blending old Renaissance and Puritan ideas of what a woman should be. Adhering to tradition, Shakespeare makes the dowry a major theme in his comedies. Customarily, middle and upper class Renaissance women could not be married without a dowry. Without marriage women were left with few socially acceptable means for survival other than joining the church. Dowries were a necessity of Renaissance life and so emphasized in Shakespearean comedy. This is not to say there were no advantages for women and their families through a Renaissance marriage. Daughters were able to form alliances between powerful families with their marriages, and this was considered in marriage negotiations as well as a dowry. Since Renaissance women needed to get married in order to support themselves, very few lived independently. The ones who were financially independent were left independent by the death of their husbands. Owing to all these societal facts Portia is left with little choice but marriage. Shakespeare's development of her character and how she confronts societal constraints is what makes her feminist role model. Portia is Shakespeare's ideal woman. Portia has blended the new Puritan ideals of what a woman should be with the old Renaissance ideals and is perfect woman. She is beautiful, virtuous, intelligent, and submissive too, yet independent. When marrying Bassanio, Portia pledges everything to him, but remains true to the spirit of feminism by keeping her independence, clearly expressed in the later courtroom scene. Portia declares her equality to Bassanio when she demands to see a letter:

...I am half yourself,
And I must freely have the half of anything
That this same paper brings you.

Portia achieves her goal in a socially acceptable manner, not offending anyone. Then in a reversal of sex role, Portia offers to pay off Antonio's debts; she is the one with money in the marriage because of her inheritance. In a further attempt to save Antonio on her husband's behalf, she decides to disguise herself as a man and travel to Venice. This is significant because not only is she breaking free of role of the submissive wife, but dressing in a man's clothes was taboo in the Renaissance because it was believed that wearing men's clothing literally made women more masculine. By turning this all into a big joke, Shakespeare, through Portia, is able to safely criticize traditional gender roles. In the courtroom scene Portia saves the day by outsmarting the men and finding a legal loophole to save Antonio. This proves she is the intellectual equal to all of the men in the play, and only her gender is keeping her from being a doctor of law. Portia once again defies convention by teasing Bassanio about losing his ring and threatening not to consummate the marriage. A Renaissance marriage was not considered official until consummated. Although this, too, is written off as a joke, this is a serious threat; it is as though Portia is saying to Bassanio our marriage is not official until you admit I am an equal. Portia defies convention at every opportunity; at the same time she is accepted by society. Because from the outset Portia works with

the Renaissance system to get what she wants and not directly against it. She may not like the terms of her father's will, but she abides by them. Disobeying the will would be too direct a revolt for her. Portia is reforming the Renaissance system from within. She is strong and independent, performing a balancing act in order to exert her independence while keeping her position in a restrictive society. Shakespeare chose to write about this form of revolutionary woman, supporting feminism at a time when the term was not coined even. He disguised these ideas in comedy, not only for entertainment's sake, but because everything he wrote was censored by the government, and these feminist views could be seen as treasonous. Similar to his character Portia, the playwright himself was working to reform the system from within. Women were not supposed to step out of line in Renaissance culture, because it was believed to threaten the stability of the state. By creating characters like Portia, Shakespeare took the risk of expressing feminist views in the sixteenth century when the term 'feminism' had not been in existence even.

In *King Lear* Cordelia is represented as an embodiment of an ethical principle (Love) and a community. Cordelia's refusal to flatter Lear can be interpreted as an opposition to Lear's authority. She does not want to be ruled by patriarchy. Her response is a passive one. Silence, the only possible way of subversion for upper-class women of the Middle Ages. However, when Cordelia reappears in the fourth act she is no longer a transgressor, but an obedient daughter to Lear. Cordelia's plainness and sincerity is fully emphasised when she asserts the reason of her being cast away: "And such a tongue As I am glad I have not, though not to have it Hath lost me in your liking." (Act 1 Scene 1) About Cordelia we should notice that she only appears at the beginning and at the end of the play, the rest of the play she is absent: a clear example of the prototypical 'Shakespearean woman': absent, silent or dead. Cordelia is characterised by her silent and obedient attitude; her sisters, on the other hand, have a full power of speech. This is seen as a 'fault'. According to feminist critics this is explained in the sense that they are defying male authority. Cordelia will go to France with the King of France and will not reappear until the fourth act. However, before going away she leaves the way to unfold the true nature of her sisters. This prepares the way for the event changing for the worst. "The jewels of our father, with washt eyes Cordelia leaves you: I know what you are, And like a sister, and most loath to call Your faults as they are named. Love well our father To your professed bosoms I commit him: But yet, alas, stood I within his grace, I would prefer him to a better place." (Act 1 Scene 1)

Lear has lost power over his kingdom and also over his daughters. He becomes a servant of his daughters, a man without a will. Lear is unable to accept this dependence and he gets mad, he cannot accept that he has lost his "male authority" over them.

According to Shakespeare's text, Goneril and Regan are clearly represented as demons, monsters, anything but human. They are responsible for the chaos going on and of the disruption of the state. They are the enemies of the mankind and must be destroyed. Women at power can only bring disgrace, however

a saviour will come. And that saviour will be a purified woman. Cordelia proves a redeeming woman, who works as a redemption of the feminine, she is a balance between her sisters.

Compared with her sisters, Cordelia comes off as saint – she is one of the genuinely principled characters in the play. But she does inherit some of her father's traits – she inherited his pride and, like her father, she can be unyielding. She responds to his pride with her pride at the beginning of the play. She also shows how different she is to her two sisters in this scene; instead of flattering her father for an end goal, she refuses to make a public spectacle of her love for her father. Cordelia is too principled to partake in something so fake and tacky. Cordelia appears in four of the twenty-six scenes in the play and speaks only a hundred lines. Her influence is out of proportion to this small contribution – her presence in the play alone offers a counterbalance to the evil represented by her sisters and their allies.

Cordelia does seem to demonstrate Christian virtues of mercy, charity, and honesty. Some have even argued that Cordelia is a Christ-figure, since she is an innocent who is put to death, and since Lear emerges carrying her, an obvious reference to the Pietà. It's unclear, however, what Cordelia's death redeems – some scholars argue that her loss redeems Lear, but that's a rather controversial interpretation. At the beginning of the play, she refuses to give in to Lear's demands and asserts her own identity – she refuses to give all her love to Lear, instead she reserves some of it for her future husband. At the end of the play, Cordelia's independence has disappeared – Lear finally has all of Cordelia's love, albeit in a jail cell. Cordelia barely speaks at all in these final scenes and she dies by strangulation – symbolic representation of the fact that she no longer has a voice. Cordelia is seen as the embodiment of a concept of nature opposed to that of Edmund, Cornwall, Goneril and Regan. For Cordelia, the natural bond between parent and child is central. Her sisters break all natural bonds and pursue their egotistical aims but Cordelia upholds the principles on which civilised life must depend upon. Cordelia, through her selfless charity regarding her erring father, has corrected the gross imbalance in Nature which was brought about by Goneril and Regan. In *King Lear* Cordelia is seen as a positive force, thus Lear is redeemed by means of a loving non patriarchal relationship with her.

In the play *Macbeth* Shakespeare has used the relationship between gender and power to show Lady Macbeth's character. Her character defies the stereotypes of women as she is neither passive nor submissive. Her husband says that she is a masculine soul inhabiting a female body, which suggests that males are ambitious and violent. Lady Macbeth tries to make her husband commit murder and when he hesitates to murder, she repeatedly questions his manhood until he feels that he must commit murder to prove himself. Therefore, feminist critical theory helps us to understand Lady Macbeth's character better due to Shakespeare's deliberate attempt of portraying her as a female possessing male attributes in a patriarchal society.

Though she pursues her goals with great determination, she is less capable of withstanding the repercussions of her acts. Her guilt soon overwhelms her. She has nightmares and tries to wash the blood

from her hands. Ultimately, guilt replaces her ambition in equal measure. We are lead to believe that it is her guilt that leads to her suicide.

First shown as an iron-willed character willing to “[pluck] my nipple from [my child’s] boneless gums, And [dash] the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this” to later being shown as possessed by nightmares of guilt (I. vii), how could such a strong character so quickly fall prey to uneasiness? According to materialist **feminist** theory, despite her earlier show of strength, Lady Macbeth’s eventual weakness is a result of a patriarchal portrayal of her gender.

Other thought that she is very much obsessed with seeing her husband on the throne because of her devotion to him again redeems her femininity. For example, Catherine Boyd suggests that, "Her violation is inspired by human love, intense passionate love for her husband"(Boyd 174). She believes that he wants to be king and therefore as a loving and devoted wife, she must do everything in her power to give him the power that he wants. In trying to attain this, she commits acts of cruelty to secure her husband's place on the throne.

Shakespeare uses this female figure to show the duality of woman: she can be feminine and loving but also vicious and wicked. Shakespeare wants to show every facet of women through Lady Machbeth’s character. Her character causes a tumultuous mixture of responses to her actions. While viewing or reading the play, one's sense of understanding Lady Macbeth and her motives is never quite fulfilled. She can be decidedly wicked, while at other times she is just pitiable and the audience can empathize with her. As Jameson states, "The crime of Lady Macbeth terrifies us in proportion as we sympathize with her; and that this sympathy is in proportion to the degree of pride, passion, and intellect we may ourselves possess. It is good to behold and to tremble at the possible result of the noblest faculties uncontrolled or perverted"(Jameson 360). Lady Macbeth's character is constructed to cause the audience to question the traditional boundaries of female and male roles.

Shakespeare wrote female characters from the inside, embodying their voices, his women become as dimensional, defiant, spirited, spiritual, active, and sexual as any of his male characters. The portraitures of Shakespeare’s female characters as discussed in the paper reveal a unique Shakespearian breed of feminism.

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