

Women in Shakespeare: A Post-Feminist Scrutiny

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ABSTRACT

"All lectures on Shakespearean comedies tend to become lectures on his women. A number of glittering heroines, bright, beautiful and witty move across the canvass and what is more they always hold the front of the stage. The world of Shakespearean comedy is a world made safe for women, a world in which a girl can prosper and come to flower." says Gordon. Women appear as supporting and central characters in Shakespeare's plays and these characters as well as the so called Dark Lady of the Sonnets have elicited substantial amount of criticism which received added impetus during the second wave feminism of 1960s. Early criticism of female characters in Shakespearean drama focused on the positive attributes the dramatist bestows on them and often claimed that Shakespeare realistically captured the essence of femininity. Ruskin sweeping generalisation "Shakespeare has only heroines and no heroes" is certainly not true of his tragedies and histories. Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia are all helpless, pathetic figures dominated by the towering personality of the hero. Shakespeare's men cannot as a class compare with his women for practical genius. Their imagination often masters and disable them. While Orsino in *Twelfth Night* remains at home passively enjoying the luxury of love Viola courts his lady for him and brushes aside all obstacles in her way. The chief masculine qualities which Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* possesses are sharp intelligence, readiness of mind, sense of honour while feminine qualities are obedience to her father, love for her husband and her conception of justice based on fairness with mercy. Cressida has most often been depicted by writers as false Cressida a paragon of female inconstancy. Lady Macbeth far excels other women in Shakespearean world by her grandeur, strength and possesses just those qualities which her husband lacks. Once the decision of murder King Duncan is taken she knows no wavering back. In the comedy *As you Like it* with all her outward gesture of bravado and manliness Rosalind's heart is essentially feminine and she reacts to the situation accordingly when she comes to learn that Orlando is himself wandering in the forest of Arden. Miranda one of the most wonderful female creation of Shakespeare's portrait gallery noted for her pity, purity and simplicity identifies herself with the distress of the shipwreck and her father's recital of the past-her father being set adrift in a boat with additional burden of looking after her. Portia in *Julius Caesar* possesses man's mind but women's might and considers herself stronger than her sex "a woman well reputed, Cato's daughter and a woman that Lord Brutus took to his wife." She waits for the success of conspiracy hatched by her husband to assassinate Caesar in the Senate Hall. Thus Gordon remark appears to be quite justified : "Shakespeare was a great student of women and his portrait of women have never been surpassed. He has women of all ranks and ages from queen to the dairy maid and from fifty to fifteen...."

In the words of Gordon: "Shakespeare was a great student of women, and his portraits of women have never been surpassed. He has women of all ranks and ages – from the queen to the dairymaid – and from fifty to fifteen. The best of artist have their limits but in this bright, particular region Shakespeare would appear to have had none."

'Women in Shakespeare' is a topic within the general discussion of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic works. Women appear as supporting and central characters in Shakespeare's plays and these characters as well as the so-called 'Dark Lady' of the sonnets have elicited a substantial amount of criticism. According to Edward Dowden "Shakespeare at sometime of his life was snared by a woman the reverse of beautiful according to conventional Elizabethan standard-Dark-haired, Dark-eyed, pale-cheeked" (Sonnet 132). The last twenty eight sonnets addressed to the Dark Lady one can see the bitterness and scorn of his heart after passing through a jury, cools down to a positive calm of mind. The picture of Dark Lady that immerge from the sonnets is that of a lady without mercy, cruel, cold and full of vices, cunningness, lying, flattery, pride and ill-ambition. But this is not the whole truth. His attitude towards the Dark Lady is ambivalent. In spite of all faults and weaknesses Shakespeare loves what his eyes despise.

Early criticism of female characters in Shakespeare's dramas focused on the positive attributes the dramatist bestows on them and often claimed that Shakespeare realistically captured the 'essence of femininity'. His women are perhaps the most attractive and also in a sense his most original creation. Much has been written to eulogies his penetrating insight into the female mind and heart. It is common observance that Shakespearean comedies are largely the stories of women rather than men. The women are superbly beautiful, intelligent, witty, loving and sparkling young persons. They carry around them a peculiarly enchanting atmosphere of love, gaiety, buoyancy, wit and humour. The men are equally loving, devoted, steadfast and adventurous young person but they pale into insignificance beside the heroines. It has rightly been remarked "the world of Shakespearean comedies is a world made safe for women, a world in which a girl may be happy and come to full flowering in which the masculine element drops its voice and recede in the background."¹

Raleigh is all praise for the brilliant women of Shakespeare—"They are the sunlight of the plays, obscured at times by clouds and storms of melancholy and misdoing but subdued or defeated." It is the Shakespearean women who direct and control all the developments in the plot and it is they who finally resolve all the complications. In one of the comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* male dominance becomes the thematic element. Lysander and Hermia escape into the woods for a night where they do not fall under the laws of Theseus or Egeus. Upon their arrival in Athens they celebrate marriage which is regarded as the ultimate social achievement for women. The festive conclusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* depends upon the success of a process by which the feminine pride and power manifested in Amazon Warriors, possessive mothers, unruly wife and wilful daughters are brought under the control of lord and husband.

In the words of Raleigh the women of Shakespeare "act not on thought but in instinct which once it is accepted admits of no argument." The subtlety and breadth of Shakespeare's knowledge of feminine instinct cannot be over-praised. His beautiful female creations derive their beauty and charm from their instinctive response to the needs of the moment. Cordelia one of the noblest Shakespearean women seems to influence the entire tragedy. Her character is not a masterpiece of invention or subtlety like that of Cleopatra. Yet in its own way it is a creation as wonderful. She appears in only four of the twenty six scenes and speaks hardly more than a hundred lines; and yet no character in Shakespeare is more absolutely individual and more in effaceably stamped on the memory of the reader. But other two daughters of King Lear Goneril and Regan have been portrayed as no less than personification of cruelty and filial ingratitude. Similarly Cressida has most often been depicted by writers as false Cressida, a paragon of female inconstancy.

The women in Shakespeare's comedies shine out at their most brilliant when ennobled and uplifted by love. Beatrice seems to have greater charm, vivacity and wit in the presence of Benedict. Rosalind is at her most charming when talking to Orlando, Portia more poetic in the company of Bassanio and Olivia gay only before Viola. They are more constant in love than men. Helena and Hermia remain faithful and firm even in the magic atmosphere of the enchanted wood near Athens. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is, of course, paragon of beauty who arrests the attention of suitors from different corners of the world for winning their bride. It is her masculine qualities like sharp intelligence, readiness of mind, courage and sense of honour which resolves the complication in the play successfully. Her correct sense of justice based on mercy, her feminine qualities like loyalty to her father and to her husband establish her as matchless Shakespearean heroine.

Rosalind's personality in *As you Like It* has been described as a harmonious compendium of all that is best and loveliest of all the Shakespeare's women. It is essentially feminine nature of Portia which is the characteristics of her deeds in the play *As you Like It*. With all her outwards gesture of bravado and manliness, Rosalind's heart is essentially feminine and she reacts the situations accordingly. In her male dress she is never able to suppress the woman in her. As soon as she learns that Orlando is himself wandering in the forest of Arden her position becomes extremely delicate. Being, however a woman by nature she cannot help feeling all the pangs of love which Orlando undetected presence in the forest of Arden excites in her heart. She expresses her feeling thus: "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak." Thus Rosalind reminds throughout the play that even in her manly attire she is a woman through and through.

Gordon remarks "women of Shakespeare" have knowledge, shrewdness, wit and courage, without ceasing to be wholly feminine and object of desire. Lady Macbeth a tragic woman protagonist of Shakespearean world is highly ambitious, resourceful and she maintains her mental equilibrium even in the most critical situation. It is particularly observable that in Lady Macbeth's concentrated, strong nerved ambition, there is yet a touch of womanhood she is ambitious less for herself than for her husband. In

her famous soliloquy after reading her husband's letter, she does not once refer to herself. She wishes to see her husband on the throne and to place the sceptre in his grasp. The strength of her affections adds strength to her ambition. We must remark also that in Lady Macbeth's reflections on her husband's character and on that milkiness of nature which she fears, may impede her from the golden round; there is no indication of female scorn, no want of wifely and womanly respect and love for him, but on the contrary, a sort of unconsciousness of her own mental superiority, which she betrays rather asserts. Lady Macbeth having proposed the object to herself, and arrayed it with an ideal glory, fixes her eyes steadily upon it roars far above all women or feelings and scruples to attain it, and stoops upon her victim with the strength and

velocity of a vulture; but having committed unflinchingly the crime necessary for the attainment of her purpose, she stops there. After the murder of Duncan we see Lady Macbeth during the rest of the play, occupied in supporting the nervous weakness and sustaining the fortitude of her husband. But she is no where represented as urging him on to new crimes, so far from it that when Macbeth darkly hints his proposed assassination of Banquo she enquires his meaning. He replies-

Be innocent of the knowledge dearest chuck
Till thou applaud the deed.

Lady Macbeth is not a woman to start at shadows; she mocks at air-drawn daggers; she sees no imagined spectres rise from the tomb to appeal and accuse her. The towering bravery of her mind disdains the visionary terrors which haunt her weak husband."³

Miranda is Shakespeare's final answer to the role of nature in moulding, shaping and supervising the career of those whom nature loves. The white purity of her soul is untarnished by any knowledge of evil. Though brought up in solitude she has not grown selfish but has developed the social instinct and the fellow-feeling. When she hears her father is recital of the past-her father being set adrift in a boat, with the additional burden of looking after her and rearing her heart goes out in sympathy to him: Pity is the very instinct of her soul. So when she sees Ferdinand lifting the logs, she offers to carry them herself to spare him the hardship which she is quick to perceive, he is enduring. Portia a Shakespeare's woman protagonist in *Julius Caesar* identifies herself when her husband Brutus tries utmost to avoid the answer of her enquiry-

"I am a woman, but withal
A man that Lord Brutus took to wife
I grant I am a woman but without
A woman well reputed, Cato's daughter
Think you I am stronger than my sex
Being so father'd and so husbanded."²

The harmonious blend of woman's tenderness as well as inherent strength of Portia compels Brutus to open his heart and all his secret plans. She does not dissuade her husband from his path of conspiracy rather nourishes immense faith in his idealism and waits for the success of conspiracy. Still till, the news arrives she is a disturbed woman "I have man's mind but woman's might.

How hard it is for women to keep counsel"

In the words of Brandes "The figure of Desdemona is one of the most charming, Shakespeare has drawn. She is more womanly than other women, as the noble Othello is more manly than other men. So that after all there is a very good reason for the attraction between them; the most womanly of women feels herself drawn to the manliest of men." Desdemona a coy and blushing girl, who turned from the address of the groomed venetian gallants, listens in raft attention to the romantic story of Othello's life; and while her maidenly imagination is set aglow by the pictures of unknown land of men whose head do grow beneath their shoulders, her heart quivers with a strange pity for this man of many woes and in her artless simplicity she makes the offer of her heart to him. She braved her father's displeasure in marrying Othello. With her modesty and gentleness are combined firmness of will and clearness of purpose. Hence to her father's challenge she answers:

"My noble father
I do perceive here a divided duty
To you I am bound for life and education...
But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother show'd

To you preferring you before her father
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to Moor, my Lord.”⁴

If she had imbibed the worldly maxims, which Emilia dispensed she might have averted the disaster of her death. She made a capital blunder in engaging herself to solicit for Cassio. She had not the remotest idea that her action might be misinterpreted. Her nature becomes obvious when Iago expresses the simple truth about her : “She is of so free, so kind, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested.”

The women of Shakespeare have also come in for some criticism. Fault has been found with them for their occasional jests and remarks considered improper for the fair sex. Praising Shakespeare’s women Hudson writes, “Virtue is with them a discipline as well as a joy; a strong upright will is the backbone of it and a healthy conscience as its keeper and he continues next to the Christian religion humanity has no other so precious an inheritance as Shakespeare’s divine gallery of womanhood.”

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