

## CHALLENGE OR PERPETUATION OF GENDER STEROTYPING IN *HAMLET, OTHELLO AND THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*

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### ABSTRACT

Female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies are portrayed as weak and feeble; however, a deeper reading of the text reveals that they are actually aware of their inferior position. All Shakespearean female characters are designed in such a way so that they fit into their social role, but what is also very significant is that Shakespeare gave hints of women who are not as fitting as they seemed. The purpose of this article is to look at a selected number of female characters in Shakespeare's best known tragedies and his comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* in order to investigate his treatment of the female in the the patriarchal social context. This paper also aims at identifying the extent to which Shakespeare challenges the patriarchal gender stereotyping as a mode to criticize the same.

**Keywords:** gender, stereotype, patriarchy, female.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Female characters in Shakespeare often have been reduced, stereotyped or misinterpreted, but they have never vanished, on the contrary with the emergence of the Feminist criticism they get a central place in terms of interpretation and examination. Feminist critiques of Shakespeare's plays have generally focused on not only women, but they also look at the ways men contribute to the framing of a Shakespearean female character. Namely, what they focus on are the relations between sexes and the cultural and political structures that influence those relations.

Feminist critiques of Shakespeare point out that unlike other types of feminist criticism, Shakespearean feminism tends to be more a matter of bringing fresh views to the old canon. What is then feminist criticism? According to Gale Green, it is criticism which takes as fact the feminist perception, a perception that comes from feminism that is the liberation of woman from oppressive social structures and stereotypes. Feminist critics pay great attention to the woman's part in literature, they also direct their focus to the aim of freeing female characters from the stereotypes, to which they have been limited by the critical tradition or from the biases and the prejudice from the authors themselves (Green, 1981). They deal with the relations of women and men, women and women and the ways that both sexes interact with the patriarchy that shapes them. What they focus and clarify are the problems of female sexuality, rape, men's attitude toward women; particularly the hesitant nature of "idealizing" and "degrading" them. Further, Green asserts that feminist critics point out that the "literary and critical tradition reinforces images of character and behavior entrenched in patriarchal and social structures: that women, when not

ignored or degraded by writers and critics, are praised for the very qualities that encourage them to accept their subordination virtues like obedience, humility, meekness (p, 29).

Culpeper argues that literary characterization can be approached on the basis of theories developed within social cognition to explain the perception of real-life people. His discussion of social schemata relates to the research on stereotypes within social cognition. He refers to Andersen et al. (1990: 192) who define stereotypes as 'highly organised social categories that have the properties of schemata'. Taylor et al. (1978) argue that stereotyping has its basis in normal cognitive processes such as categorization: it is a way of structuring and managing potentially overwhelming input data. They suggest that 'stereotypes can be thought of as attributes that are tagged to category labels (e.g. race, sex) and imputed to individuals as a function of their being placed in that category' (Taylor et al., 1978: 792). This is how he is describing the relationship between categories and social schemata. He further to another definition that stereotype is a set of beliefs which is 'stored in memory as a cognitive structure and can then influence subsequent perceptions of and behaviors toward that group and its members' (Hamilton and Sherman, 1994: 15). It can be viewed as an abstract group schema having central tendency beliefs or attributes characterizing a group 'as a whole' or 'on average' (Hamilton and Sherman, in Culpeper, 2000: 296)

This article aims at showing how the above-mentioned definitions find correspondence in *Hamlet's Ophelia*, *Othello's Desdemona* and *Katharina in The Taming of the Shrew* and the extent to which Shakespeare challenges the norms and the stereotypes that restrict the lives of his female characters? Is he challenging (explicitly or implicitly) the social and political structures supported by the patriarchal ideologies? To what extent are Shakespearean female characters controlled by patriarchal imperatives?

Sidney Finkelstein, believes that Shakespeare's greatness is based on his ability to reflect on the "the social conditions surrounding him, medieval institutions stretched almost to the breaking point by the new forces rising within them" also noting that "he was as critical of the incipient capitalist currents as he was of the old feudal-minded order" (Finkelstein, 1973, pp, 18-24).

On the other hand, the analysis of Gerda Lerner focus on the way feminist history shifts from "compensatory" history (the study of "women worthies," achievers by male standards in a male world) to "contribution" history (the study of women's contribution to and oppression by patriarchal society) to the history of the "the social relations of the sexes" the study of the relative position of men and women in historical periods (Lerner, 1975).

## 2. THE TRAGIC FEMALE

Shakespeare's characters serve as agents who challenge the typical images of male and female, also the definitions of what it means to be masculine and feminine, asserting that each gender is never exclusively masculine or feminine, rather they each carry qualities of the opposite gender. Other questions that he raises deal with the nature of patriarchal ideologies that impose gender roles to be acted out by both sexes. Today's feminist critique focuses on many of these same issues, therefore such critical questions are fundamental for the Shakespearean classroom.

Neely argues that there are three modes of feminist criticism that could be applies to Shakespeare's female characters. The first, "compensatory mode" deals with powerful and prominent women. This mode claims back the virtue, power and the complexity of those characters in opposition to the "traditional criticism which minimized or stereotyped them"

The heroines tend to be viewed in a partial vacuum, unnaturally isolated from the rest of the play in the Shakespearean canon, and the culture in which that canon is rooted. Thus the process where woman call out for attention, the characteristics given to them, and the framework within

which they are valued become questionable – vulnerable to the objections of a historicity and wishful thinking and what is worse, subject of contamination by the sex-role stereotypes of the culture in which the criticism exists and in which it is reacting against (Neely, 1981, p. 7).

Neely further refers to Anna Jameson who was writing in the nineteenth century who praises Shakespeare's heroines for their intellect and spirit, but she also notes that they are also tempered by "softness" and is defensive about their "bold language and overt expressions of sexuality". This clearly indicates of the stereotypization of Shakespeare's female characters. Adding that:

Contemporary critics may too much admire the boldness of the bedtrick while ignoring its duplicitous or demeaning aspects. Influenced by their own battles for equality, feminist critics may overcompensate and attribute inappropriately or too enthusiastically to women characters' qualities traditionally admired in men — power, aggressiveness, wit, sexual boldness. Reversing but not discarding the conventional stereotypes, they may compromise both their interpretations and their feminism. The mode also may find it difficult to deal with women who are not heroines and with the men who are important to all of Shakespeare's women, whether powerful or powerless (p. 8).

Lady Macbeth for example, is defined as one of Shakespeare's strongest female characters. She is ambitious and ruthless as the men in her world. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth reject to have children, a rejection that challenges societal expectations. She declares this in her famous monologue in Act 1, scene 5. Here, she calls on her spirits to make her infertile and strip her of the ability to breastfeed. Her complex personality and brave decisions make her one of the most intriguing characters Shakespearean tragedies. In *Macbeth*, as in Renaissance society, even in today's society men were projected to engage in public affairs (as soldiers, politicians, leaders), to be the talkers, make decisions; they are dynamic. Their role in society is duty-bound (mostly to the state), aggressive, and self-satisfying. However, women were conditioned to play a more passive role. For example, at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* when the boys are walking around the streets of Verona and talking dirty about girls, Sampson (one of Capulet's servants) says, "And therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall; therefore, I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall." (act, scene I) These lines clearly reflect the stereotypical, even misogynistic mindset of the Renaissance men. Women are, physically, emotionally, intellectually and morally inferior to the men, their sole existence is to complete him, to sexually gratify him and to be "thrust to the wall." Yet, figures like Lady Macbeth Gilbert asserts, in her murderous ambition transgresses the prescribed gender roles, in doing so she only succeeds in "monstering herself and becoming a parody of womanhood, until madness again confines her to feminine helplessness" (Gilbert, 2016).

In his portrayal of Hamlet and Ophelia, Shakespeare raises troubling questions about gender and madness. Ophelia is certainly a victim, who seems to be left at the mercy of the male figures in her life. Hamlet is not directly the cause of Ophelia's death yet, if we take into account the fact that Ophelia is closely related to Hamlet, his innocence then should be questioned. The way Hamlet treats Ophelia is far from respectful and affectionate, namely he moves back and forth from expressions of eternal love and brutality such as in his speech in the "nunnery scene".

Tracing the reason for Hamlet's unstable behavior, leads to Queen Gertrude's actions. By marrying her dead husband's brother—Claudius, right after her husband's death, she breaks the rules of femininity and moral values. This perhaps is the moment that draws Ophelia's fate. It is because of Gertrude that Hamlet is not capable or trusting woman any longer. His anger and bitterness lead him to believe that all women

are untrustworthy and unreliable. Hamlet reflects “the guilt and pollution” over Ophelia, that he believes exists in his mother. No matter how this guilt is viewed, Ophelia at the end of the day suffers as a result of Hamlet’s patriarchal assumptions of womanhood. What is also eminent in terms of viewing Ophelia as a victim is the fact that she was controlled directly by two leading male forces.

Elaine Showalter’s in *Representing Ophelia* examines the character of Ophelia from a psychoanalytical perspective, and gives a critical account from a Lacanian and Freudian view. She observes that Ophelia “appears in only five of the play’s twenty scenes” and as a result “her tragedy is subordinated in the play” therefore she “has no story without Hamlet” (Showalter, 1993). Many critics claim that Ophelia’s madness is natural, “it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps the nature of the purest form”, whereas Hamlet’s madness is observed as metaphysical. If we take into account Simone de’Beauvoir’s capital feminist assumption that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, therefore Ophelia’s death is a result of cultural and patriarchal constructs, rather than something natural. She doesn’t simply go crazy because her body and nature produces, her madness is rather a product that her father, brother and lover produce. Showalter further, refers to a Freudian interpretation of Ophelia, where she is seen as an attachment to her father, whereas Hamlet is “attached to his mother”. Ophelia “has fantasies of a lover who will abduct her from or even kill her father, and when this actually happens, her reason is destroyed by guilt, as well as lingering incestuous feelings. As a result, she breaks down because she fails to shift her sexual attachment to her father to a man who can bring her fulfillment into a woman” (Showalter, p. 90). Her madness is also seen as schizophrenia because “schizophrenic woman has become the cultural icon of dualistic femininity”. Showalter refers to Laing who argues that “schizophrenia was an intelligible response to the experience of invalidation within the family double binds experienced by daughters” (p.78). However, beneath the stereotypical characterization of Ophelia, hides a silent revolutionary who is capable of seeing through the patriarchal ideology. Gabrielle Dane sees Ophelia’s madness as her only weapon to fight back:

Madness becomes Ophelia's last resort, her unconscious revolt. Indeed, what else is left her to do? Constituted to accept male command, how then, without it, can she act on her own behalf? How might she find the words to communicate her frustration and longing, how to lodge her protest? To do so, she must explode outside of the categories designed to circumscribe her, must journey beyond the boundaries of sanity, to a place where she can first locate and then express her rage. All of the men in her life would play upon her as though she were a pipe, would seem to know her stops, would pluck out the heart of her mystery, and would sound her from her lowest note to the top of her compass. (Dane, 1998, p. 412)

Desdemona is another woman whose faith is in control of the men in her life. She is the daughter of a possessive father, and the wife of an insecure general. Generally seen as a weak character, Desdemona shows strength and audacity, especially when it comes to her marriage and commitment to Othello, the Moor who was not her father choice. In marrying a Moor, Desdemona challenges the marriage convention of the time, and faces criticism, which she handles unapologetically. She makes it clear that she loves Othello and is loyal to him. Throughout the play, Desdemona’s name is consistently accompanied by endearing adjectives. For instance, her husband Othello refers to her as “gentle Desdemona” (Shakespeare, 1.2.25), For Cassio she is “divine Desdemona” (2.1.73) as well as “virtuous Desdemona” (2.3.311, 3.1.34), Iago calls her “fair Desdemona” (4.2.224), while her friend Emilia refers to her as “sweet Desdemona” (5.2.122). It is noteworthy that all the characters who are in one way or another related to her address her by her name only. They rather utter adjectives that signify nobility and compliance, which encourage the audience to identify her as a docile, amenable woman.

The tragedy in *Othello*, like in most Shakespearean tragedies, occurs as a result of submission to patriarchal rules and stereotypes; this doesn’t mean that Desdemona was extremely passive to this subject

matter. Critics view this tragedy as a result of misunderstanding. Othello is not able to understand the real character of Desdemona, and she is not able to protect herself by changing Othello's preconceptions of women. Many also view Desdemona, as passive, kind, soft, obedient; qualities that don't correspond to Othello's masculine qualities of dominance, power and aggression. Gayle Green sums up what feminist critics note on the implications of patriarchy and the "the cost to the individual of the acceptance of patriarchal hierarchy, the diminishing, destructive effects it has on both male and female characters: the cost to Desdemona of being an "obedient lady" and to Othello of accepting a code of "honor" that requires revenge" (Green, p. 30).

Studies of *Othello* criticism for years have focused on the real moral significance of Desdemona, that is to say that there are two different observations related to her. In the first one, she is observed as a "desexualized spirit", "ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint" and the other party attacks her and degrades her as "little less than a wanton, or even an "outright strumpet" (Rosenberg, 1992). However Adamson argues that it is a universal failure to simply reduce things to opposite moral extremes, such as "saint" or "strumpet", these Adamson adds, "are simply a persistent consequence of our culture's sexual heritage" (Adamson, p.169). One thing for sure, is that Desdemona is a self-confident woman, hence her inability to believe that Othello would ever hurt her. From a traditional perspective, she is seen as a selfless vessel of virtue and her eventual martyrdom to her husband's misguided and reckless judgment has inspired pathos with every theatrical production through the ages. But this indeed is the problem. Attributing excursively positive characteristics to Desdemona creates a perfect woman. The question here is whether she is the epitome of absolute virtue? So much so, that she is not even relatable as a character, therefore it is hard for her to be likeable for the audiences. In fact, it could be argued that, Shakespeare does not really portray Desdemona as the perfect embodiment of virtue, rather she embodies the ideal of a virtuous woman, but she dramatizes the failure of any woman ever becoming perfectly virtuous or saintly. The cause of a tragedy has very little to do with whether she committed adultery, but rather with the expectation of saintliness that both Desdemona and the men in her life impose on her. Shakespeare however, reminds us that Desdemona is not divine, she is human. Her flaws are not due to her being unchaste or dishonest, but are in fact reflected in her stubbornness, immaturity and occasional lack of empathy. All of which are not bad, but rather stereotypical traits.

### 3. THE FEMALE IN COMEDY

Katharina the "shrew" on the other hand falls into the group of strong, determined, headstrong, rebellious and other traits usually attributed to men. Noticeably, Shakespeare divides his female characters into two groups: the strong and "manly" ones that always appear in his comedies, and the seemingly weak ones that usually occupy his tragedies. This is also questionable. Why has he categorized them in these two different and opposite groups? Is Shakespeare trying to convey a certain belief, is his aim to highlight the patriarchal ideologies?

Tomoe argues that Shakespeare's "shrews," in fact, manifest classic or unexpected elements of transgression through their grotesque, empathetic, or destructive and regenerative dialogues with other characters. By violating categorical boundaries, shrews threaten social order and upturn their situations. Therefore, in that way, they function ambiguously and ambivalently. By using them to create confusion in his plays, Shakespeare also has his shrewish characters bring out the varying voices and perspectives of those to whom the characters speak or are related; as such, these characters with unruly qualities can be perceived as facilitating a social critique method that is inherent in the plays in which they appear (Tomoe, 2016).

Shakespeare, being the critique of the social circumstance of his time, uses comedy in order to refer to serious but confound social anomalies in a less serious manner. Comedies are usually treated less serious drama, so when they see those strong female characters on the stage, they do not take them seriously, they just assume that these types of women exist in this kind of plays. Assuming that Shakespeare wanted to “promote” an idea of a strong woman, that will still keep him safe from the troubles with the state and the institutions; this was a way to convey his thoughts and avoid being banned.

Who is Katherine and why is she a “shrew”? By a definition in OED ‘shrew’ is defined as “a bad-tempered or aggressively assertive woman”. Why is it when a woman “talks back” to a man she is a shrew? Why is it when women who are intelligent and independent and unwilling to give in to patriarchy are labeled as “shrew”? Is it because she represents a threat to the male hegemony? She clearly hates and detests the expectations of the society, where she is supposed to obey her father and she should show grace and courtesy to the man that will ask her hand and to her husband eventually. Katherine is clever enough to perceive that fighting back on her own will cause her bigger problems and as a result she will end up miserable. Even though Petruchio humiliates her, she still chooses to marry him. As it is given in their first conversation Petruchio says that he is the person that fits her most, i.e. he claims to be different from the other man who she can easily dominate. By consenting to marry him she at least gains respect and consideration from others, rather than suffering the universal disrespect which she receives as a shrew. The question is if she has transformed into the ideal wife, the one that she hated to be. Most critics tend to seek the answer in the final scene. Namely some argue that her final speech represents a real transformation to an obedient wife, while others see her as a defeated woman who can no longer fight the powers of the patriarchy. In order to make sure that Katherine turned into a domesticated, subservient wife, one should examine the true relationship of Katherine and Petruccio. In fact, what attracts Petruccio is Katherine’s wit and spirit. Whenever they meet, they insult and tease each other which perhaps indicate that they have things in common.

Kathina, eventually surrenders and adopts conventional wifely behavior. Her transformation comes about not because Petruchio has forced her to act acceptance of a repugnant role, but because she has seen in his tricks the ugliness of her own shrewish behavior she has also come to recognize the emotional rewards for herself in being a dutiful wife. He has understood her, and now she understands both herself and him.

In her famous “submission speech” Kate says:

I am ashamed that women are so simple  
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,  
To seek for rule, supremacy and sway,  
Where they are bound to serve, love and obey (V.ii.161-4)

This speech is usually read as the masculine triumph over sheepishness (strong womanhood), as the eventual victory of man over woman, however Shakespeare would never conclude his plays in such a conformist way, yet this final speech should be read as the very beginning of the battle, namely I see this speech as “Trojan horse” image, where Kate cunningly gets a pass to the realm of manhood, from where she can easily manipulate. As Sirluck observes “What looks at first as fixed system of rigid hierarchical divisions, granting power to a limited class, dissolves into a circular pattern of shifting power relations Authority can be sense in her voice in the final speech, now that she gained it she is more capable of control and power” (Sirluk, 1991:428). She further notes that feminists like Juliet Dushinberre observe Shakespeare in terms of “trans-patriarchal” perspectives, whereas other critics observe Shakespeare as “a brutally frank celebration of patriarchal power” (see Dushinberre in Sirluk). However, it could be said

that Shakespeare was neither feminist nor chauvinist, his views and ideas were rather diplomatic, he was very well aware that taking a “feminist” side was not a very good idea and as a result would bring no good to the woman. Through *The Taming of the Shrew* Shakespeare represents as Sirluk states “the social practices and institutions of Shakespeare’s time in a way that highlights their tyranny, despite foregrounding their success” (Sirluk, 1991: 421).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Role of woman be it in Shakespeare or in other writers, has often been restricted stereotyped and minimized. Yet, in order to criticize Shakespeare, one should be really careful, for we are looking at male dramatist of an enormous writing corpus, writing at a time completely different from ours. However, we should also bear in mind that the greatest artists do not necessarily conform to the ideologies of their cultures. He uses the culture in order to create characters and conflict. Gertrude and Ophelia are important characters, although they seem unimportant to Hamlet. Desdemona and Emilia, play a great role in terms of forming the plot and the way things unfold in *Othello*. The effects of patriarchy are dominant in every play, but they are presented in different ways. As we saw, patriarchy takes lighter forms in comedies, even though Katherine declares submission to her husband at the end.

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