Portrayal Of Women In William Shakespeare S Plays Essay, Research Paper

The critical question of most scholars studying William Shakespeare s writing was whether he was trying to stress the importance of equality and fairness amongst women or was he, as a male raised in the 16th century, expressing his beliefs of women as a gender. Did Shakespeare truly believe, as he had Richard in Richard III state, that the differences of male and female was as simple as the words male and female being associated with different statements? For example, the word male being associated with bruised arms, stern alarums, and barbed steeds, while female is associated with merry meetings, delightful measures, and sporty tricks (Lenz 36). This word association was not only implying that men are strong and women are weak , but it also shows Richard s determination to obliterate those who represent the opposite those who are women (Lenz 37). As most scholars find Shakespeare did not use the abuse and ridicule of women as form of entertainment and education but more of a way to show the audience the inequality that women are faced with. He showed the mistreatment of women in his plays to make his audiences recognize it, not agree with it.

Many readers who have not sat and taken the time to thoroughly read and study Shakespeare are quick to assume, because of some of the offensive ways Shakespeare portrays women in his plays, that Shakespeare was another sexist man. Readers also do not understand why Shakespeare could not conduct plays that provided the answer to these discriminating ways. Yet, through summarized excerpts and examples it is easy to see that, in the words of Karen Newman, Shakespeare liked to raise issues rather than provide solutions (Waller 40).

According to A.L. Rowse, Puritanism was a movement within the Church of England for closer identification with the principles of the early Protestantism (3). Puritanism was highly influential in the ways of men of the 16th century and the way Shakespeare portrayed women in his play. Shakespeare was a normal boy who had a normal education. Shakespeare, the well-known genius was a man who was much like that of a modern grammar-school boy, not good enough for college (Rowse 1). His plays are very grammar-schoolish in sense of methods and drama (Rowse 2). When Shakespeare was being raised and educated, Puritanism was at a high point of teaching. The Puritans teachers were not willing or interested in changing the views women and their inferiority, and in fact they wanted to enhance the attitudes already held, such as forced marriage, marriage for money, child marriage and marriage between young women and old men (Dusinberre 4). These Puritan teachers were highly concentrated on morals. They focused on sex, whether it was inside marriage or outside marriage, and on the male attitudes towards female virginity (Dusinberre 24). Juliet Dusinberre points out that Puritanism pushed the dramatists into talking about women. The preachers posed questions about attitudes to women which provided the playwrights with raw material, and created an atmosphere which stimulated them to use it (30).

In the play, The Merchant of Venice there is a theme of submission of women to men as authoritative figures. Portia who is preparing to marry her wooer, Bassanio, states this speech of submission to him:

Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit

Commits itself to yours to be directed,

As from her lord, her governor, her king.

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours

Is now converted. But now I was the lord

Of this fair mansion, master of my servants

Queen o er myself; and even now, but now,

This house, these servants, and this same myself

Are yours (http://tech-two.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html).

Portia s submission is almost impulsive to her, because that is the way women were raised to be. Her obedience, submission, and making of him her King is considered a true act of love to Bassanio. Submission in Puritan eyes, was the handmaid of harmony in marriage (Dusinberre 85).

According to Dusinberre, a wife-tamer granted his wife fill liberty once she allows him all authority (85), as in Hamlet where man and wife, once married, are viewed as one. For example when Hamlet is leaving, he must make one final salute before he leaves to England. He salutes him with: Farewell, dear Mother. Claudius corrects him smoothly: Thy loving father, Hamlet. and Hamlet bursts out My Mother father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so my Mother (Dusinberre 99).

In the course of Romeo and Juliet, the theme is a socialization tragedy of young men and women in their societal roles. They were always told to defend themselves, families and honor. Yet, it still has a sexual teaching in it for the boys and men. Coppelia Kahn claims that Romeo and Juliet fosters in the sons fear and scorn of woman, associating women with effeminacy and emasculation, while it links sexual intercourse with aggression and violence against women, rather than pleasure and love (Lenz 172-173).

With Othello we deal with women, Desdemona, and the subject of women as whores. A whore is always lower-class, a rake is always upper-class. To call a woman a whore, as Othello calls Desdemona, not only casts aspersions on her morals, but takes away her position in society (Dusinberre 52). Although Othello idolized Desdemona and cherished her, he disposed of her word at the moment Iago initiates doubts of her love and faith. Othello, despite his deep love, still held the tendency to think of Desdemona as an object (Lenz 212). The personal worth of women is lowered in this play because a man might sleep with a woman not his wife and remain courageous, generous, honest. A women, on the other hand, in that one act registered her own worthlessness in every other sphere (Dusinberre 53).

In Peter B. Erikson s criticism of As You Like It, he reads the forest as an idealized enclave of ultimate male dominance in which both men and women may expand their sense of agency, but where female vitality is not able to become independent (Waller 156). The writer Jean Howard also points out that the cross-dressing of Rosalind, enables her to redefine the role of a women in patriarchy, but only to a limited extent: her actions share the constructed nature of gender assignment, but the hierarchical two gender system is never queried (Waller 157).

The Taming of the Shrew, because of its many interpretations, is one of the most controversial plays regarding women and their subordination to men. This play is filled with irony and imagery that fill the minds of the readers and viewers of the play. When reading the play the reader is not sure if the play is going to degenerate into a knock-about, farcical battle of the sexes or become the study of how strong men and women adapt to the demands of a relationship in a sexist patriarchal society (Waller 39). According to John C. Bean, revisionists see the Taming of the Shrew as a relatively sophisticated social comedy, the ironic texture of which directs our attention not primarily to Kate s psychological illness but to the social illness of a materialistic patriarchy (Lenz 65).

One source of imagery Shakespeare provides is one of his soliloquy s delivered by Petruchio. Petruchio talks about his relationship with Kate and compares her taming to the taming of a falcon. Yet, while we read this metaphor concerning Kate s taming and learn more about falconry, the more insidious the metaphor becomes. Falcon taming produces a strong bond of affection between bird and falconer, but it is a bond forged out of coerciveness and manipulation, resulting in the falcon doing the handlers bidding (http://daphne.palomer.edu/ Shakespeare/default.html).

Kate s final speech is the most controversial topic regarding Taming of the Shrew. Kate is a woman who speaks her mind and does not settle for less the she deserves and for this gains the title of shrew. Petruchio spends the entire play wooing Kate, trying to tame the shrew that she is, resulting in the marriage of the two. While speaking with two other sets of married couples Petruchio boasts that Kate knows the duties of a woman best out of the three wives and in a non-direct way has her prove her taming through a speech. Kate delivers a speech in which Shakespeare postulates domestic harmony as being the submission of a wife to her husbands authority (Dusinberre 108). The last speech Kate makes teaches a very ironic lesson to the other women regarding the duties of women. Shakespeare also uses the association of the family and the nation.

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,

Thy head, thy sovereign

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,

Even such as women oweth to her husband,

And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,

And not obedient to his honest will,

What is she but a foul contending rebel,

And graceless traitor to her loving lord?

I am ashamed that women are so simple,

To offer war where they should kneel for peace,

Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,

When they are bound to serve, love and obey.

(http://tech-two.mit.edu/Shakespeare/works.html)

Many people interpret this speech in many different ways. Germaine Greer reads it as a defense of Christian monogamy that rests upon the role of a husband as protector and friend, and it is valid because Kate has a man who is capable of both (206). Alternative readings are possible though, it can be read as Kate s acceptance to Petruchio, her showing her superiority to the other women, or being delivered with a wink to the audience (Waller 40). The bottom line is Kate s speech should not be taken at face value. Kate s submission gives her power over Petruchio. The Puritans interpreted a wife s submission as a mode of behavior which could coexist with liberty (Dusinberre 108). The power is indeed in Kate s hands and her final speech proves that indirectly, such as the way she suggest in line six that if the husband s will is not honest , then obedience is not required (http://daphne.palomer.edu/Shakespeare/default.html). So while there is no doubt that Kate is subjected to power throughout the play, it is also true that she wields an irreducible force of her own (http://daphne.palomer.edu/Shakespeare/default .html). What the end comes down to is that Petruchio could only play the part of lord if Kate agreed to the game (Dusinberre 110).

The feminism of Shakespeare s time is still largely unrecognized. The struggle for women s rights is thought of as primarily a nineteenth century phenomenon (Dusinberre 1). A boy s development into manhood through testing experience is one of the oldest themes in literature, while Girl s had to wait out a twenty-five-hundred-year literary history before anyone made fiction of their growth (Lenz 100). As Germaine Greer notes, women s writing was so often edited by men that finding a pure women s text from the early modern period is next to impossible (42).

Although critics believe that the portrayal of women in Shakespeare s plays are discriminating, as classics go, Shakespeare is not bad reading for a girl (Lenz 101). While, it is true that Shakespeare never allowed a women a play of her own, Shakespeare liked women and respected them; not everybody does (Lenz 101). Shakespeare s women are to be praised, for example the dignity of Portia, the energy of Beatrice, the radiant high spirits of Rosalind, and the sweetness of Viola (Lenz 102). Juliet, Cordelia, Rosalind, Beatrice, Cleopatra, Hermione, Emilia, Paulina Shakespeare s girls and mature women are individualized, realized, and fully engaged as human beings (Lenz 103). A young female reader is given some possibility and inspiration while reading Shakespeare s plays such as As You Like It, The Merchant of Venice, and Much Ado About Nothing. Who would not, if she could, be beautiful, energetic, active, verbally brilliant and still sought after by desirable men, like these Shakespeare heroines (Lenz 102)? And while submissive mildness is not lacking in Shakespeare, such as Much Ado About Nothing s Hero, these characters are never central to the action (Lenz 108).

Shakespeare could create women who were spunky enough to have fun with, and still find ways to mediate their assertiveness (Lenz 103). Shakespeare and his contemporaries could rely on their audience s alertness to controversy about women (Dusinberre 19). So, although William Shakespeare reflects and at times supports the stereotypes of women and their various roles and responsibilities in society, he is also a writer who questions, challenges, and modifies this representation.

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