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## A Study of Gender and Humanism in Shakespeare's Drama

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Shakespeare's plays and poetry are seen with his secular attitude showing inclination towards classical and Renaissance ideas. It is all about reason, mankind, human and individualism. Shakespeare was a humanist showing significant perceptions, concentrates on moral, political, and philosophical questions of universal significance, trying his best to change the world. There are other writers who have less sympathy for the middle-classes. With fewer aspirations accepting the whole manner of existence. Struggling to protect their right wit torn up happiness and respect from the privileged aristocratic class. William Shakespeare is a rich and suggestive author in terms of gender issues and ideology. In treating masculine and feminine characteristics, Shakespeare treated males with certain "feminine" and females with certain "masculine" characteristics.

Shakespeare, a humanist and a man of crucial perspective, concentrates on moral, political, and philosophical questions of universal significance; he strives to change the world. Shakespeare brought new-fangled realism in drama and took it to great height with profundity. His dramas have the rich diversity of humanity with the help of hundreds living, believable characters showing multiplicity in individuality. Even after centuries, the characters can be identified with their aspirations, their strengths and their failings, and sympathise with their moral dilemmas. He was a true human with true human experiences bringing humanist approach. Janet Suzman: "Shakespeare was a humanist in everything he wrote."<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare's plays and poetry reveal his secular outlook the subject matter is remarkably secular and seems to have been influenced by classical and Renaissance ideas about the importance of reason and of mankind and human individualism. Shakespeare was man of reason so he did not believe in god and life after death rather he had more inclination towards ghosts and devils and witches. But religion is hardly a major power or driving force in their lives; moral choices are made for human – rather than religious – reasons and characters such as Macbeth reap the human and social consequences of bad actions in the loss of the love and respect of their fellow human beings, and other earthly punishments. William Shakespeare's plays allow us to judge the different social values and status of women in the Elizabethan society.

### Gender and renaissance

It has been from times that the female was defined by the society and what a female was supposed to be and do was an act of Renaissance culture. According to Elizabethan or Shakespeare's society built upon Renaissance beliefs, women were expected only to marry. As their single occupation, marriage held massive responsibilities of house management and child nurture. Additionally, women were expected to be silent, chaste, and obedient to their

husbands, fathers, brothers, and all men in general. Patriarchal rule justified women's subordination as the natural order because women were thought to be physiologically and psychologically inferior to men.

The same view for women was held by Shakespeare. Women representing the feminine gender of the society should have the following virtues which, importantly, have their meaning in relationship to the male; obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience. However, gender characteristics were socially constructed and there was an easy cross-over of masculine and feminine traits to both genders. In the plays of Shakespeare, we find a patriarchal society. Men were to engage the public affairs such as politicians, soldiers, kings, duke, leaders etc. The female had to engage with household matters.

The patriarchy is easily observed in a play like *Romeo and Juliet* with the power of Lord Capulet. Male had a vital place and role to play in the society, whereas the female had a less significant place and a role to play in the society. The woman is either in the house of her father as Juliet is or in the house of her husband as Lady Macbeth is. Men were the decision makers. On the other hand, women were expected to assume a more passive role. For example, at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* when the boys are milling around the streets of Verona and talking dirty about girls, Sampson (one of Capulet's servants) remarks, "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."<sup>2</sup> The passage is ripe with stereotypical Renaissance thinking: women are weaker (physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally), and they exist for male sexual gratification-they're only good for "thrusting" to the wall. When Lady Macbeth decides to become an "active" partner in her husband's deadly mischief, she needs to pray.

Come, you spirits ... unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe topful

Of direst cruelty, \*<sup>3</sup>

These lines suggest that it is not "natural" for a woman to be cruel. *Othello* illustrates the expectations of the Elizabethan patriarchal society, the practice of privileges in patriarchal marriages, and the suppression and restriction of femininity. The three women in *Othello*: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca behave and conduct themselves in indubitably ideological expectations of Shakespeare's Elizabethan society and to the patriarchal Venetian society that he creates.

One of the significant impacts of Renaissance was the improved status of women. On the other hand Shakespeare had also changed the concept of women in some of his plays. Women have come out with different fabric in relating the character of women in the society. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, many Renaissance ideals are explored and integrated into the framework of the story and characters. Women in *Much Ado About Nothing* are not limited to

traditional roles and responsibilities. Their position and place of women are far above then seen earlier in society and literature. Beatrice is come with more potential. Shakespeare succeeded in creating strong characters with vibrant inner lives. Although, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Hero is seen with many more conventional ideas about womanhood during or before the Renaissance, Beatrice reflects the changes that were taking place for women during the Renaissance. Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* is very strong-willed and spoken. One of her significant quality is her sharp tongue and capability to make the decision about her marriage. Beatrice symbolises individualism of Renaissance. She is in conflict with Benedick about her status of woman and proves that even though she is a woman, she is mentally and verbally on par with any man and can hold her own. She declares herself a strong woman by making a statement “I had rather hear by dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me”<sup>\*4</sup> and makes it clear that she does not need a man to depend on, emotionally or otherwise taking a position behind the men and serving only as decoration or an object.

As a woman who exemplifies Renaissance ideas regarding the high-minded position of women, the character of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* is the best example. She is able to make her own assessments and stands on her own and looks apart in the play as one of the strongest and most vital characters rather than taking a position behind the men just like an object for embellishment. She is no more a material to be used for men. Even still, there are several remnants of pre-Renaissance concepts of women. Beatrice, after learning of what happen to Hero declares how she wishes she was a man so that she could defend Hero’s honour. However, she states, “I cannot be a man with wishing; therefore I will die a woman with grieving”<sup>\*5</sup> Here she recognizes that although her status as woman holds some importance, it is still not on par with that of men.

*Much Ado About Nothing* also reflects the reinforcement of Renaissance humanism. The key themes were humanism, which focused on human beings and their potential as well as the idea of perfect beauty. The beautiful courteous language used by the characters in the play reveal the concepts of humanism during the Renaissance. The characters sometimes surpass one another with multifarious and humorous words in the play. One of the best examples of this is of Benedick who makes fanciful statements on a regular basis. He even makes fun of Claudio for his use of the same rhetorical flair stating, “his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes.”<sup>\*6</sup> The new language was a new a way to learning, bringing out art and beauty in a better way. Each character in Shakespeare’s plays is individuals. It is their own mind that they work with. They are not governed by some other mind. Don John, a character in the play is seen using the powers of his own mind to constantly think and devise plans and ideas. Each of the main characters is able to successfully represent some aspect of Renaissance humanism, whether it is by the inner workings of their minds, their physical appearance, or their ability to create beauty with words and use this as a skill. Shakespeare creates a perfect sense a Renaissance world by constructing characters that adhere to the philosophies of the Renaissance.

## Gender and Sovereignty

Shakespeare's gender and sovereignty was somewhere guided by the age in which he lived; the rule of Queen Elizabeth Tudor. Shakespeare's plays have female character with power in leading role. But still some where it looks that the women are the supportive protagonist to the male in the play. They are never seen as to govern the society or the crowned-heads. The female protagonists act in authoritative ways with success. As concern about the sovereign's gender formed one of the primary social considerations of Shakespeare's day, one might expect to see these gender in considerations revealed in Shakespeare's writing. Shakespeare was a man who saw women as a weak personality for politics. Shakespeare absolutely advocates women as a threat in politics. The tragedies like; *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are example of this opinion of Shakespeare. With the help of the play Shakespeare brings out the political gender fretfulness. The main subject of the play is the conflict of power and throughout the play we find female character involved in creating anxiety. The anarchy for power by the woman is sorted by the solution leading to system that is patriarchal. This is only the appropriate way for peace and stable sovereignty. *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* show that female leadership leads to apprehension.

Political stability and the quarrel for the crown is the basic theme of the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In both the plays it is the crown that leads to murder. Lady Macbeth, getting an idea of kingship for Macbeth convinces and helps her husband to commit betrayal by killing the king and claiming an offered crown. The play *Hamlet* depicts the murder of a monarch by his brother and the subsequent marriage of this brother Claudius to Queen Gertrude. This union subsequently throws the power of the crown in dispute between Hamlet, the King's son, and Claudius, now spouse of the Queen. In both of these plays, women's actions lead to political instability, and a disruption of natural harmony occurs because of their involvement in the political processes.

Lady Macbeth is highly ambitious lady, acting unnaturally. Her act is a disruption to the political system especially for gender she belongs to. When she reads Macbeth's revelation of the witches' predictions, she immediately assumes that only her insistence will lead Macbeth actively to pursue and acquire the desired kingly position of power and authority. She summons the absent Macbeth with chiding words:

Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round.\*<sup>7</sup>

Lady Macbeth is a character who can manipulate the situation as well as Macbeth according to her way to achieve her aspiration and ambition. Tennenhouse describes the character of Lady Macbeth: "At the outset of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare gives Lady Macbeth the very same elements which other Jacobean playwrights use to display the absolute power of the state. He shows how these might be used subversively."<sup>8</sup> It is about the political involvement of a lady, whose action is revolutionary leading her husband to kill the monarch

in the house. It is the strategy played by a woman to achieve a political power and condemns every act done by others. She rises to the throne only by the virtue—or vice—of her husband's ascension as king, and yet, her insistence provided the impetus for the power base. Thus, Lady Macbeth exemplifies a negative anode of female ambition and power within a Renaissance context. Shakespeare tries to give less importance to female power in fact it is a weak power. Women are shown as ambitious with less reason and thinking. Women to power lead to perversion. Positioning woman over man has not just domestic but political connotations as well. It shows Lady Macbeth's influence over Macbeth reflects woman's possible authority as monarch and to have control over the subject. Lady Macbeth's powers is a reflection with the topsy-turvy Elizabethan world. Tennenhouse suggests that the Elizabethan era actually was an "age which thought of state power as female"\*<sup>9</sup> due to the lengthy tradition of female rule from Mary to Elizabeth. Female rule lasted for a full generation of English people. At the same time a tendency to think about state power as female does not necessarily correspond with a cultural desire for state power in female hands.

Strength and power last with female for short period and the same happens with Lady Macbeth. It is her act that leads to downfall. She starts suffering from insanity and sleepwalking. The female cannot survive in a role of dominion. Lady Macbeth seems to be unaware with the power of her conscience and therefore she makes a mistake by claiming that "none can call our power to account."\*<sup>10</sup> In fact Lady Macbeth's personal assessments make her an offender. She is obsessed with bloodied hands and tries to commit suicide. Ironically, Lady Macbeth's death eases tension by marking the beginning of the end, an end which corresponds with a return of normalcy to the political structure. This thematic correlation transfers to the contemporary culture. The Elizabethan English also anticipated and desired the return of male rule.

Macbeth portrays the unnatural and ambiguous aspects of female political power and gender whereas Shakespeare's *Hamlet* explores the issues of sovereignty and sexuality showing the male character in erroneous position. Because both sovereignty and virtue reside within the queen's body, sexual actions carry increased significance for the female sovereign. Thus, Hamlet reflects the gender and sexuality anxieties prominent within the Elizabethan world. Claudius murders his brother and marries the queen to become the king. His act does not him right to the throne. Hamlet is striped out from his right to sovereignty. His authority is taken over by malicious act of Claudius and creates a situation of ambivalence regarding the proper ruler of the state. The male in the play is shown as weak person using female as ladder to rise high. It shows a distress to a male who achieve power through marriage to a female monarch. As, we find in the statement made by Hamlet: "My father's brother, but no like my father I than I Hercules."\*<sup>11</sup>

A murderer and a villain;  
A slave that is not the twentieth part the title  
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;  
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,



That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,  
And put it in his pocket.\*<sup>12</sup>

Hamlet describes Claudius as malicious usurper of power through sexual manipulation: Such a contemptible and larcenous characterization of the monarch's spouse reflects both the English hatred of Mary's Philip and the suspicions surrounding suitors for Elizabeth. It is not only the male have been criticised but also the female for improper marriage and sexual relationship. It is unnatural within the society. Hamlet not only accuses Cladius but also his mother Queen Gertrude for indecent and unacceptable sexual activity and marriage. Hamlet looked the relationship with anger, greed for power, authority and sex. The couple was married less than a month after the death of Hamlet's father, and Claudius himself calls Gertrude his "sometime sister, now our queen."\*<sup>13</sup> Thus, Hamlet attacks his mother, warning that "rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen."\*<sup>14</sup> In Hamlet's eyes, Gertrude's sexual activity defile her character.

Hamlet's perception reflects moral standards of the day. Royalty of the sexes was proved in different way. As women had no opportunity to fight on the battlefield, chastity was the principal measure of their honour and virtue. Levin states that: "for a woman, her only source of honour is her sexual credit."\*<sup>15</sup> Within the plays Hamlet and Macbeth, there is a conflict arising due aspiration for power and authority one by the male using female as a card to success and other by the female convincing and leading the male partner to crime.

## WOMEN

The women of Shakespeare are always seen in conventional roles, but behind the conventional system there is the stronger parts played by the women too. We find Desdemona, stand against her father's orders and marry a moor. Bianca ingenuously takes part in Desdemona's death. Emilia has an opportunity to save Desdemona but remains silent. The women are treated second to men or a subordinate to male partner but here the females are not in the holds of their males. The women stand for themselves. They work according to their mind, reasoning and understanding. These women take part in anything that pleases them. They are rule by themselves not letting the men tell them what to do. The world of William Shakespeare was the very same world in which we live. It was not different in any way. Women's rights, homosexuality and the struggle for equality are still for which the voice are raised.

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