

Obliteration of Female: A Review of Shakespeare's Victimization of Women

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Abstract:

Despite the fact that William Shakespeare reveals an uncanny insight into the social problems of the Elizabethan era and many of his plays, poems and even sonnets, is revealing social problems that are faced by women, however, this review paper is trying to manifest the contradiction in his real attitude toward women's position in society. The case study is The Rape of Lucrece in which manifests Shakespeare's women subjugation and inferiority in comparison to men due to different reasons by Lucretia's suicide. Shakespeare presents his own interpretation of the ideal status for women in his patriarchal culture since Elizabethan England relied on the masculine interpretation of socially acceptable standards and Shakespeare presents his female characters in a questionable light in an effort to support the patriarchal viewpoint, while establishing what is appropriate for women in a patriarchal society, due to the reason that male power is the announcing voice of what a woman ought to be. Shakespeare's foremost purpose in the portrayal of female characters was to bolster the male patriarchal understandings all through England. Therefore, Shakespeare's female characters are mostly to be seen as the conveyors of epiphany for the male characters by their suicide.

Key words: Anti-feminism, Elizabethan England, Patriarchy, Rape of Lucrece, Suicide.

Introduction:

William Shakespeare was undoubtedly the most remarkable genius of all times, not only in the realm of literature, but also in other areas of social life as politics, sociology and psychology. Some might not approve of this idea, but I would admit that Shakespeare was one of the greatest typical examples of the British policy, as I believe him to be a very great politician, who at the same time could not be blamed for this policy in which he employed greatly for the sake of his personal benefits.

William Shakespeare reveals an uncanny insight into the social problems of the Elizabethan era, and he proposes the solutions for the crises that were intertwined with the fabrics of life in the English society of his time. His wit and tact are so much adored and

mature that even today many of his messages could be employed and utilized in the twenty first century, as Shakespeare is neither time bound nor culture bound.

In many of his plays, poems and even sonnets, he reveals the social problems that are faced by women and there are numerous articles in which claim Shakespeare to be the defender of women's rights and that he aimed at changing the society's outlook upon women, but as I have gone through a great deal of his plays and some of his poems, I found it quite contrary in the case that he might even be called an anti-feminist literary figure.

Marianne Novy in her article Demythologizing Shakespeare states:

We can find a range of attitudes in Shakespeare partly because a range of attitudes really exists in his work. In short, both because of Shakespeare's unique status in our culture and because of the particular complexity of his attitude toward women, the feminist critic of Shakespeare confronts a somewhat different situation than the feminist critic of the other authors I have mentioned (2010).

Discussion:

Therefore, Shakespeare's women have been subjugated and kept inferior in comparison to men due to different reasons, in which one of the greatest among them is the Elizabethan culture and social atmosphere. But what I would like to propose is not to say that women have been kept under the dominion of the men due to the social beliefs in that time, there is no doubt on this issue, rather, what I mean is that Shakespeare was so much purposefully aggravating this superiority of men by the purposeful representation of the female characters in his plays and poems.

Take for instance Lucretia in *The Rape of Lucrece*, the legendary Roman noblewoman, who had a tragic death caused by the adultery which was cast on her.

Coppélia Kahn in her article "Publishing Shame: The Rape of Lucrece" writes extensively on the sacrifice of Lucretia for the sake of preservation of her husband's honor and social status, in which I would like to oppose. Kahn says that since women were the properties of their husbands and on the condition of the women's consent in the incident of rape, there would be no honor and respect for either her husband or her father, those women who had such great souls who tended to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others, willingly commit suicide so that their own names and the names of those attributed to them would not be stained. She goes on to mention that Shakespeare was in opposition of this idea and by rewriting *The Rape of Lucrece*, he meant to bring an enlightenment on the ground of this evil action of committing suicide.

I approve of her idea that Shakespeare wanted to bring an enlightenment, but the means in which he utilizes for the sake of this enlightenment are too patriarchal, that the enlightenment should definitely be followed by the sacrifice of a woman, otherwise, there is no enlightenment at all. Hence it is quite easy to grasp that the male majority of the society was the only important part of the social life for Shakespeare that in almost all of his plays, he repeatedly either sacrifices a female character or at least puts her much lower than the male

characters, including the fools, clowns and other so-called characters as Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest* who cannot be categorized under the human classification.

Kahn goes on further to the extent of defying and thanking Shakespeare for the victimizing of Lucrece, since by doing so, and by the incident of the rape itself as the main conflict of the poem, the whole nation of the Roman people has been freed from the enslavement of the monarchy and they were able to experience the revolution. It is really interesting that how the rape of one woman who does not have any notable right in the society leads to such great an outcome as revolution, but deep down we could grasp that the poor woman who is Lucrece in this case is just a mean for the male supremacy to achieve their goals in life. This is because women were to be taken as the property of the men and rape of male possessions will undoubtedly lead to the war between them, as every one of them desires and longs to prove his masculinity by the power that the revenge will bring about for them. So, this whole scenario of revolution could be seen as a war of masculinity to prove and regain the power and not merely for the sake of the women. If it was otherwise, Tarquin did not even dare to think of this sinful action of rape. Therefore, I could say that Shakespeare indeed wants to bring enlightenment for the nation, but only for the male and he does this by victimizing the females in most of his works. Therefore, Shakespeare's female characters are mostly to be seen as the conveyors of epiphany for the male characters by their death.

In the Roman societies of that time, committing suicide was for the sake of the protection of the reputation, however, Shakespeare, being fully aware of his coming fame and nobility, represented these suicides in his plays so that he would be much adorned and praised by the males in his society. The reason is obvious; as his patrons were males who actually fueled his life, he had to write so that those rich men would be pleased. The role of the woman in the Elizabethan England was too much minimized by the male supremacy, that they were valued if only they were married.

Conley Greer in her article "To be a Woman" beautifully records that:

To male society, any behavior of a woman outside of her role as the subjective wife was cause for alarm. Any portrayal of suspicious by women without harsh consequences or punishment would have placed Shakespeare in opposition to the patriarchal society that supported his work. By pandering to male suspicions in the patriarchal society around him, Shakespeare puts his characterization of new womanhood on the stage while satisfying the expectations of his male audience. The theme of jealousy allowed Shakespeare to accomplish his artistic goals while still accommodating his audience (2003).

Based on Greer, "the Elizabethan society of Shakespeare's day was completely dominated by masculine thinking that governed all aspects of daily life" (2003).

Therefore, in Shakespeare's plays, men should keep their wary eyes on women at all times in order to take control of the women and Shakespeare presents his own interpretation of the ideal status for women in his patriarchal culture. I could strongly admit that Shakespeare's female characters were severely restricted by ideas of masculine dominance. Despite having a queen in charge, Elizabethan England relied on the masculine interpretation of socially

acceptable standards. Therefore, it could be stated that his portrayal of women was influenced by the prevailing ideologies in the culture in which he lived. Furthermore, I can say that Shakespeare presents his female characters in a questionable light in an effort to support the patriarchal viewpoint. In the case of Lucrece, her suicide demonstrates the potential implications of the mistrust that exists between man and woman, otherwise, there would be no reason for her suicide in case she was determined by the support of her husband.

Based on Greer: “women should express themselves as individuals as long as they did not cross the lines of accepted female behavior, and men should never whole-heartedly trust a woman because of her unpredictability” (2003).

Shakespeare goes beyond just criticizing morality; he also gives dire warnings and, in the end, establishes what is appropriate for women in a patriarchal society. In Shakespeare’s time, “there is a definite need expressed for the classification of women in regards to their societal status; a woman was a virgin, a wife, a widow or a whore. There was no middle ground” (Greer, 2003). And after the rape of Lucrece by Tarquin, since she is not considered to be a respectable woman who is chaste, in order not to fall into the category of a prostitute, she is left with no choice other than committing suicide so that she could defend her chastity. Hence, male power is the announcing voice of what a woman ought to be. For the foremost portion, Shakespeare’s utilize of women includes a tricky circumstance that requires a male arrangement and solution to the trickery.

The setting of the world in which William Shakespeare composed his plays manifested much of the sexist themes present within the Elizabethan world. On the whole, Shakespeare authored his plays for the male onlookers. His patrons were men, and in order to make a living, he had to write in a way which was satisfactory for those male audiences, otherwise, he could not be a member of Lord Chamberlain’s Men. And I strongly believe that Shakespeare’s foremost purpose in the portrayal of female characters was to bolster the male patriarchal understandings all through England.

The whole thing is quite ironical, since England was ruled by a queen, and the so-called open-minded genius of the time was known as the defender of women’s rights, however, no women was ever allowed to perform on the stage and the younger male actors took on the difficulty of playing female characters. Men did not avoid playing the women’s roles on stage because there was not any other alternative. In this case, how could we say that the author of these to be played plays was on the side of women? The answer is so simple, since if he wanted to literally bring on stage female characters, he would have probably provoked patrons’ fury, because a woman who could so easily change her appearance and sway people to believe the character, was viewed with alarm by many in this era. So, women’s involvement into the world of theatre was controversial while focusing on the role of women in the British theatre. The role of women in the British theatre during the 16th century differed significantly from the role of women in the Spanish and French theatres, maybe because of Shakespeare’s talent on keeping the women subjugated and thus aggravating the situation in England, while the other countries were passing away from the male dominion gradually.

It seems that Shakespeare's ideal woman — the kind he presents in the most depth in the comedies — is active but willing to subordinate herself, like the ideal woman of the protestant preachers discussed by the Hallers. Although the variety and complexity and general fascination of the women Shakespeare creates (as well as the sympathy with which he portrays their subjection to social restrictions), encourage one to say that Shakespeare's drama shows liking and appreciation of women, his attitude is not free from ambiguity. I have been suggesting that those he presents most attractively are strong women who at some point are willing to make at least a gesture of subordinating themselves to the men they love (Novy,2010).

By contemplating on the extract from Novy's article, I could even assume that Shakespeare was somehow involved in mindset construction in a way that was extremely delicate for the onlookers. He was presenting strong women who were willingly subjugating and suppressing themselves to their male counterparts, and the ones who did this act of submission were considered to be chaste, at the same time blissful women, exactly to the opposite of the aggressive, independent women whose destiny was either death or execution by the authorities for the devil actions they have undergone wickedly.

Therefore, what is obvious by reading these lines by one of the many Shakespearean critics is that he still kept on subordinating women so that they will not revolt against their male counterparts and what could be grasped is that the female characters are more subject to subordination than the male characters crafted by him. "Shakespeare so often portrays anti-feminism in his male characters" (Novy, 2010).

Considering the victimization of women in Shakespeare's works and mostly in the poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, and regarding the fact that Elizabethan England was undergoing changes toward modernization or the so-called Enlightenment, which has been established in the previous eras other than its actual, well known occurrence, Shakespeare was even endeavoring to alter the viewpoint on the self-destruction of human beings or the suicide, therefore, the act of victimization of women would be justified as just. Lines in his works concerning the act of suicide

do indeed voice the traditional Christian horror of a deed which religion has set down as a mortal sin, in some respects, the most dreadful of all sins, since it admits of no repentance. The canon set by the Almighty against self-slaughter, the "prohibition so divine that cravens my weak hand," has ever been a powerful deterrent motive to those in whose lives religion is a vital force. Shakespeare knew this well, and his dramatic instinct bade him attribute these dominant sentiments to the greater number of his Christian characters (Hanford, 382).

Hence, what is crystal clear is "then, the plays do but reflect the thought of the men of Shakespeare's time" (Hanford, 393).

Hanford goes on claiming to the extent that, those characters who have been victimized by Shakespeare and ended their bitter lives upon their own wills, "chose the dignified way of self-inflicted death where meaner spirits would have preferred disgraceful life" (391).

Professor John Churton Collins in his work *Studies in Shakespeare* records:

And here we may pause for a moment to notice how exactly similar is the attitude of Sophocles and Shakespeare towards this crime. By neither of them has any glamour of sentiment been cast over it. In no case is it associated with magnanimity. In no case is it associated with honour, but in all cases with intemperance, or ignominy or with both (1904).

Accordingly, we can grasp that the act of suicide has always been condemned all throughout the course of history, and even Plato's scastigation on the deed, is a proof of Shakespeare's misjudgment. Based on Plato, the most serious crimes a human can commit are "impious deeds destructive to the state's condition. Suicide is among these crimes because it constitutes the worst kind of murder. As such, the action must be punished by dishonorable burial: the suicide's corpse is buried alone, in deserted, nameless places, without headstone or other marker" (Christensen, 2017).

Henceforth, how could such a deadly sin be the gate to the betterment of the conditions of the people living in the state of Rome as fellow-citizens of Lucrece?

Conclusion:

I could say that the chastity of the women was the cultural expectation in the Elizabethan era and at the same time, no control by women over their lives, in which was brought about by the irrationality of men, and Lucrece, among many other women on the same condition, being the victim of this irrationality, has been put under submission for the sake of preservation of her husband's honor. So her husband is considered to be a guide in order to alter the irrationality to something rational. On the same account, we can grasp a sort of so-called rationality in Shakespeare's poem that renders the cultural expectations in his own time, that a sort of rationality on the side of males is to be the mean for this alteration. The woman, being also considered as the property of a man, has no human rights for herself, and on the condition of being raped, it is as if a male's property has been theft. Therefore, the woman's willingness or unwillingness is something which is not considered at all, and there is no position for women's subject, there is only one position and that is suicide. However, it is expected that a literary genius is to assist in changing the society's outlook upon women and not just trying to satisfy the male patrons who are so patriarchal that do not consider any position for women other than the domestic house. There should be a position for women to establish their own agency in society, and this is something which is still required and necessary in the 21st century.

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