

SHORT RESEARCH

WOMEN AS HEROES IN SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare studies Nature in the context of human behaviour. His drama deals with transformations and he displays these changes on both social and personal levels through alternating the graphic images from characters to situation. In an authoritarian society where lives of women were governed by a belief system which resulted out of Nature's disposition of preordained roles in society, the portrayal of dominating female voices would have bothered many. Shakespearean drama is a protest against the society which is always dominated by the destructive forces of male paranoia, egocentrism, patriarchal instinct of exploitation of the weak, male sexual anxiety and corrupt abuse of rules of justice by the powerful. A study of the female mind presented in Shakespearean drama is seen at its best in The Winter's Tale. The following article is an attempt to explore some of the aspects of Womanhood in Shakespearean art.

Keywords: Transformation, spiritual revolution, toxic masculinity, wholesome femininity, regeneration

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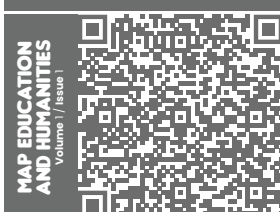
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PERDITA: Out, alas!

You'd be so lean, that blasts of January
Would blow you through and through.
Now, my fair'st friend,
I would I had some flowers
o' the spring that might
Become your time of day;
and yours, and yours,
That wear upon your virgin branches yet
Your maidenheads growing: O Proserpina,
For the flowers now,
that frightened thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares,
and take
The winds of March with beauty;
violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength--a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one!
O, these I lack,
To make you garlands of,
and my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er!

(The Winter's Tale, Act IV, Sc. iv, 130-150)

The Winter's Tale is a play about 'transformations'. The seasons' transformation plays an important symbolic role as the sub-context of the play. In *Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare enlarges the scope of transformation by combining the transformations of cosmic scales with the changes on the spiritual grounds of our social arena. Always intrigued by the bond between husband and wife, Shakespeare sees the social climate dependent on this relationship, exactly the way it is the tilt in earth-Sun relationship that causes changes of weather on earth. Shakespeare studies Nature in the context of human situation. He enjoys alternating the graphic images from characters to situation and draws those metaphors in bold he believes explains his understanding of human mind and soul to his audiences. The first three acts of this play are dominated by winter; exactly the way they are dominated by the destructive forces of male paranoia, egocentrism, patriarchal instinct of exploitation of the weak, male sexual anxiety and corrupt abuse of rules of justice by the powerful. All this destruction is personified in the character of King Leontes. The tone of the tragedy is set when the physical and

spiritual image of Leontes, his male heir, his only son, Mamillius prepares to tell "a sad tale's best for winter" to Hermione, the beloved queen of Leontes and Mamillius' mother.

All the seasons are marked by particular associations which appropriate to their characteristic features. Winter is almost always associated with gloom, death, destruction and hard trial of life. Leontes symbolizes all these elements of grievous nature within. And, to be honest, through him, the patriarchal system's decay and corruption is represented as he is the very 'zenith' of the chain of being. Colloquially, 'the old man winter', the personification of winter as a male antagonist was well known to Shakespeare's audience. The stressful images and the design of characters, dominating the text and the movements on stage, are masterly appropriated for the first tragic half of the play. Leontes, the self-destructive force, the worn out but the established system of social values is at the center of the action. If allowed to continue without checks, this system has capacity to erase all the possibilities of wholesomeness of life. It is reflected in the way the play leads us to witness the tragedies of the 'death of the future', personified by Mamillius and the 'supposed death' of elegance and love shown through the broken hearted mother, Hermione.

The rest of the play, from Acts IV onwards is set in the background of the effect of spring. Spring substitutes vindictive jealousy, with love. It is the diverse nature of the passion of love, infused in spring and manifested on stage through the characters of Perdita and Florizel, which, 'as an affective category' brings unity to the entire latter half of the play. It is the spirit of spring that provides unity to the structure of the play and to its thematic patterns as well. Spring in *Winter's Tale*, appears as full-fledged character, symbolizing the spirit of the goddess of 'rebirth and regeneration'. Eostre, Flora, Persephone, Hora are only a few of the names, all the female names, associated worldwide with spring, echo in the persona of Perdita. These are the goddesses of freshness, blossoms, fertility and new hope, the regenerative features of Nature; quite a contrast to the 'old man winter'.

In an authoritarian society where lives of women were governed by a belief system which resulted out of Nature's disposition of preordained roles in society, the portrayal of a dominating female voice over all the male counterparts in Act IV of this play would have caused many eyebrows to

go tense and many fingers were definitely crossed. But then, this was Shakespeare; this is how he had been challenging the norms of his society for more than a decade already and without taking credit away from him, we can assume that the questions his boys dressed as women were asking on stage were now the general outcry. '(Women, in Shakespeare's age) asked new questions about the limits of authority, equality, freedom of conscience, sexuality, property, and the legacy of inherited ecclesiastical wisdom about the inherently frail nature of woman. That wisdom, derived from the Church Fathers' teaching on the Fall and endorsed in popular culture, was at odds with the radical Protestant and Puritan determination to reassess the role of marriage in society, and as a corollary, the role of Eve in relation to Adam.' (Dusenberre Juliet, xvi).

The unchallenged position of the sons of Adam on the throne of civilization was questioned much earlier in the play by Queen Hermione. As the accused, she delivers the most eloquent speech Shakespeare has ever designed for a woman threatened by authority. It was the society where female submission and silence was considered virtuous but here, instead of choosing to be a 'perfect woman' through keeping her lips sealed, Hermione decided to defend her case against the jealous husband and the unjust ruler:

Leontes: Thy brat hath been cast out, like to itself,

No father owning it—which is indeed

More criminal in thee than it—so thou

Shalt feel our justice, in whose easiest passage

Look for no less than death. (3.2.85-89)

Hermione: Now, my liege,

Tell me what blessings I have here alive,

That I should fear to die. Therefore proceed...

Upon surmises, all proofs sleeping else

But what your jealousies awake, I tell you

'Tis rigour, and not law.

Your Honours all,

I do refer me to the oracle.

Apollo be my judge. (3.2.105-114)

Hermione's speech challenges the patriarchal system and Apollo's oracle sealed its consent upon it.

Officer: (Reads) 'Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, his innocent babe truly begotten, and the King shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found. (3.2.132-135)

The final sentence can be interpreted as a warning of the divine forces; our entire male oriented civilization will crumble down if women are not restored to the pedestal of glory assigned to them by the order of Nature. Act III, understandably, ends on a grim note. A sixteen years leap is taken by Time and we, all of a sudden, find ourselves in the sunny pastures and meadows of Bohemia. Act IV and Act V are dominated by the female triad, Paulina, Perdita and 'resurrected' Hermione. Nature itself 'found' what was 'lost' by a corrupt system, the womanhood, serenity and love.

Perdita, whose speech during sheep-shearing festival is quoted above, marks the beginning of this new age. She is a Hermione without restraints of the court's artificial life; brought up by Nature herself, she appears in the scene dressed as the goddess of spring. The transformation of stage from the gloomy court and its cold conspiracies to the warm Bohemian meadows where Nature at its best haunts the mind and the human nature at its most pure warms the heart, confirms Shakespearean plan of orchestrating a spiritual revolution. The forces reflecting the culture of "toxic masculinity" are replaced by 'wholesome femininity'.

Shakespeare's plays, especially those composed after 1600, repeat time and time again the thematic patterns of male jealousy, rebellion children whose legitimacy is put into question and a female hero emerging from the chaos of the plot-structure as the only voice of sensibility. Observe the following lines, in response to King Polixenes' threats, spoken by Perdita in Act IV:

PERDITA: Even here undone!

I was not much afeard; for once or twice
I was about to speak and tell him plainly,
The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage but
Looks on alike.

Such clarity of thought in opposition to suppression, such vocal rejection of the system which is based on manipulation of power and wealth and such refined, philosophically poetic protest is rarely seen in male voices of Shakespearean drama. These lines were delivered by Perdita after the speech of the King Polixenes who, upon finding out that that his son prince Florizel had been in love with the shepherdess for quite some time, threatened to destroy her:

POLIXENES: I'll have thy beauty scratch'd
with briars, and made

More homely than thy state.....

.....you, enchantment.....

Unworthy thee,--if ever henceforth thou

These rural latches to his entrance open,

Or hoop his body more with thy embraces,

I will devise a death as cruel for thee

As thou art tender to't.

This is typical of the male aggression we have seen earlier in the play or, as such, elsewhere in Shakespearean drama. But after the speech of Perdita, things are set in motion to transform. Things transform, dramatically, exactly the way she had wished in her blessings in the passage quoted at the very beginning of the present article. The passage is from Act IV, Sc. iv. In this scene Perdita is presented to the audience as the Roman goddess Proserpina (Greek, Persephone). This is highly symbolic since we know that the lord of the underworld Pluto, had kidnapped Proserpina and she was allowed to bring the spring back every year on her return to the world. We expect, consequently from our Proserpina, Perdita to return to the gloomy darkness of the

land where her plight began sixteen years ago and transform it to the region of light. When we see her first in this scene, she is decked and crowned with flowers. She dispenses charming, fresh flowers to all the guests, and this gives us a clear idea that Ma-millius' "winter's tale" has broken out into Perdita's spring colours.

'Shakespeare shifts from the fallen world of Sicilia, in which the female body is held responsible for its ruin, to a Bohemian garden of fecundity and renewal. These contrasting explications of the garden illustrate its multiple interpretations during the Early Modern period, and vastly different from the Sicilian pleasure garden, Perdita's 'rustic garden' is an attempt to reclaim the Edenic paradise lost during the first half of the play. Shakespeare's language in Act 4 is riddled with allusions to the garden, and while criticism surrounding Perdita affords ample attention to her catalog of flowers and its relationship to the Early Modern debate concerning art versus nature, I would argue that her 'rustic garden' functions as a counterpart to Hermione's cultivated pleasure garden. Perdita's positive representation of the garden seeks to redeem her Eve-like mother, and while this reading may seem transparent, it is in fact much more complicated. (Amy Katherine Burnette, 37).

The passage (Act IV, Sc. iv, 130-150) begins with Perdita's address to Camillo. Winds of January would blow right through him since he was weak and failed to stand against the onslaught of corruption and injustice. To Florizel, she wishes to offer flowers that could match his spirit of the new age where distinctions of class were about to become obsolete. Immediately the very next reference is to daffodils that bloom before the swallows dare return from the south. This reference is confirmation of the signs of a new beginning; daffodils are the first flowers that one may see blooming in spring to indicate that the wintry nights are over. Violet, the image of modesty and grace is the flower that follows next. Modesty and grace, she sees as a virtue that Juno's lustrous eyes and Venus' beauty cannot circumvent. Reference to violet led to primroses, the symbol of productivity but also of suffering and death, and oxlip which was known to be a cross between primrose and cowslip. Cowslip was an image of enchantment, often associated with fairies. These flowers, symbols of suffering and magical beauty lead to lily, the image of innocence, purity

and fertility. It seems as if without the discourse of spiritual suffering and feminine grace, the reward for motherhood is barely attained.

Gillyflower comes next to get our attention. She says strangely, 'Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o'th' season / Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors, / Which some call nature's bastards. Of that kind / Our rustic garden's barren, and I care not / To get slips of them" (4.4.79-84). She 'cares not' for gillyflower for only one particular reason, the flower was associated with sexual license (Norton, 2392). In this passage, while having an argument with Polixenes, Perdita rejects cross-breeding "for the same reason she rejected festive disguise: because she does not believe Polixenes' assertion that art can 'mend nature—change it rather'" (Jensen, 299).

Perdita, line by line, emerges as a role model for the young women of the age, in fact of any age. She incorporates all the qualities of the flowers she distributes; her gifts are not just meant for the guests at the festival but for all of us who see the patriarchal system gaining definition of womanhood in her character.

Womanhood is celebrated throughout this play to a level that it bypasses all other plays of Shakespeare in projecting women as heroes. This adventure to explore the hidden potential of women as leaders of community was always a fascination of Elizabethan society. Shakespeare's contributions in defining the features of women who deserve to lead the mankind are absolutely decisive. From Rosalind and Viola in 1597 to Miranda in 1611, we have a galaxy of women who force us to reshape our concepts of role of women in our social and personal lives. Rosalind's disguise as Ganymede or Hermione's inanimate statue's transformation to a living being contributes to our fundamental epistemological dilemma between what is visually seen and what is true.

Shakespeare does not portray these great women as exotically beautiful in body or attire; neither are these second fiddle to some great male hero but they are heroes on their own account, fully responsible for their actions and independent in their minds. These ladies are far from the idea of 'reduction'; these are the greatest source in Shakespearean drama of enriching the souls of the readers and the audiences. Shakespearean art is not escapism; it urges us to include our own horizon of

expectation to the play and its characters for the sake of wisdom the play intends to impart to us.

Paulina's role (wisdom personified) in *the Winter's Tale* is a great mystery. *The Winter's Tale*, argues Janet Adelman, presents 'an astonishing psychic achievement'. It is through Paulina that Shakespeare relocates the idea of the 'the loss and recovery of the world in the mother's body, returning to us what we didn't know that we had lost'.

The image of Hermione that is presented in the 'statue scene' is described repeatedly as the property of Paulina. The sculpture is a piece 'in the keeping of Paulina' in her 'removed house'; behind a 'curtain', in a 'chapel', 'apart' from a 'gallery' of other images owned by the Sicilian courtier (5.2.92-105, 5.3.10-86). Paulina is said to have overseen the production of the statue with care, having 'privately twice or thrice a day, ever since the death of Hermione' visited the

'removed house' (5.2.103-5). When displaying the supposed sculpture in the final scene, Paulina refers to it as 'my poor image', and affirms that 'the stone is mine' (5.3.57-8). Despite this evidence of Paulina's status as a patron of the visual arts, critics have not focused on this significant aspect of her function in the play, although Paulina's patriarchal agency is frequently acknowledged.' (Chloe Porter, 71)

We can only wonder that how an attendant woman could gain so much spiritual power over the monarch of Sicilia that he awaits her good judgment before taking decisions of the scale upon which the country's fate depends. However, what we are made to believe in, is a shift in the political structure of the world that Leontes or Polixenes live in.

What Leontes said to conclude the play, can be taken as a message by the king. He asked Paulina to lead away in haste from hence so that the wholesome state could be restored. It can truly be taken as Shakespeare's message as well for the women of such spiritual wisdom as Paulina, the women of such patience and elegance as Hermione and women of such courage, grace and natural integrity as Perdita to help, by coming forward, the lost mankind and lead us all away from this patriarchal chaos:

Leontes: Good Paulina,

Lead us from hence, where we
may leisurely

Each one demand an answer to his part

Perform'd in this wide gap of time since first

We were dissever'd: hastily lead away.

(Act V, sc. iii)

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