Shakespearean Women Characters: Their Autonomy of Opinion-Formation

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's women characters have been studied from almost all feminist perspectives and the ideological outcome is that they have to fit themselves in a masculine disguise in order to evolve as memorable and influential characters in the framework of the play. The question of their use of autonomy in decision making and opinion-formation is very decisive when any inference needs to be drawn with regard to the efficacy and literary value of these characters. The present paper proposes to analyze the extent to which the master playwright has given these characters the onus of autonomous reasoning and influence on the thematic basis of the play. Are they metaphorically 'silent' in deciding the circumstances they are thrust into or they whether they are actually being allowed to function on their own by exercising their power on the situations they find themselves pitted against? The possible answer to this question can empower the assertion that Shakespearean plays do possess subtle streaks, if not confident strokes, of feminism. Whether in the real world, or in the supposed world of Arden - we can witness his vision of conceiving a more egalitarian society. In order to substantiate my study, I shall be attempting an analysis of a few of the female characters namely – Portia, Rosalind, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra. These characters have revealed their power of autonomy over opinion-formation, decision-making and influential roles in the course of their representation in the respective plays. Finally, I will try to arrive at a conclusion as to how Shakespeare can be seen from a sociological perspective as a playwright who highlighted the possibilities of granting greater autonomy to women in contemporary society, although he chose a unique medium – in the form of intelligently contrived female characters – to fulfill this intention.

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INTRODUCTION

Opinion formation is a measure of autonomy about decision making and decision taking. How far has Shakespeare given this autonomy to the time-honoured female characters of his plays who have occupied a distinguished position in the discourse of Shakespearean criticism? A closer study of the positions enjoyed by some of them might reveal Shakespeare's inclination towards making them lively and focal in the strategy of action adopted by the plots of these plays. This perspective has been given due importance through individual studies of such characters within the gamut of academic theory and literary interpretation. Autonomy in taking decisions has not only influenced the characters functioning in the play but has been equally decisive in directing the course of actions leading to the resolution of the respective plots.

Contrasted with the society, against the backdrop of which these characters have been drawn, the picture is unconventional and unique. The position of women in the Elizabethan society was marginal and same was the obvious case with their roles in decision-making, be it personal, social or political spheres of life. Political representation was not meant for them and suffrage rights were a distant dream. So the scenario was that of conforming to the diktats of a patriarchal order. Even in the practice of drama the system of cross-dressing was in vogue and women were mostly discouraged from attending theatres. In spite of all this, they continued to feature in the plays – whether tragedies or comedies or even history plays. It is quite evident that the creation of the imaginary and idealistic world, as projected by these plays, was trying to conceive a more egalitarian and tacitly matriarchal world where women would act as driving forces behind formulation of judgments and development of perspectives.

"What's a play without a woman in it?" (Kyd, *Spanish Tragedy* 4.1.97)

In his essay "Macbeth's Usurping Wife", Roland Frye has categorically mentioned that Lady Macbeth had usurped that conjugal authority that Shakespeare's age considered to have been naturally and irrevocably assigned to the husband (Frye 102). Henry Bullinger further studies this relation from the angle of a sustained collation between reason and pragmatism on the one hand, being represented by the husband and passionate involvement with emotional verve on the other hand, as represented by the wife (Bullinger 405). This paradigm is a step towards launching feminine behaviour on the platform of effectiveness vis-à-vis the thematic concerns of the play. Lady Macbeth has been portrayed as the motive-force behind initiating her husband into the dark and demonic world of crime. She kindles the passionate thirst for power and authority in Macbeth and constantly inspires the latent desire in him for acquisition of absolute and unrestrained power. The homiletic allegories which have established the evolution of the wife from her husband's 'rib' and her occupation of a middle position somewhere between the head and foot has been transgressed. The purpose is to occupy a position of greater prominence and effectiveness. In accordance with the marital norms, a wife's duty is to lead her husband towards the accomplishment of a more responsible and morally upright role. The husband is supposedly in a position of greater autonomy, either to accept or reject her advice, with due exercise of his discretion. Frye makes it clear that Lady Macbeth crucially dominates the seventh scene of the first Act and the second scene of the Second Act through her powerfully verbal tactics. She is far from being submissive and emerges as a bold and ambitious woman who wishes to cast her husband into a superior mould of the same clay which makes her wish to fill her 'breasts with gall.' Lady Macbeth fearlessly declares that she would have "clashed the brains out" (1.7.58) of an infant to realize an otherwise unachievable goal. This as well as her earlier "unsex me here" (1.5.39) invocation have been already analyzed as suitable testimonies to substantiate Lady Macbeth as attempting the seizure of a powerful and dominant masculine role to witness the fulfillment of her husband's futuristic goals of political success. She simultaneously twists the conventional images of a wife and of a mother, though the latter is rendered a more horrifying and gory image. The implications behind the willful self-representation in socially and emotionally disturbing roles is a ploy devised by the dramatist for her to extend her powerful voice in asserting an unalterable authority against the obstructing ideology of a secondary role that a woman is expected to comply with.

Lady Macbeth is all prepared to 'chastise [Macbeth] with the valour of my tongue' against the conventional norms of a congenial marital life where the husband chastises his wife to fit her

within the norms of social conformity. She renders as problematic the image of a woman with her desire that she be 'unsex[ed]' so that she succeeds in forcing Macbeth to come out of his shell of indolence influenced by the conventions of hospitality towards Duncan. Lady Macbeth transgresses the formulaic gender role and maternal codes of conduct quite efficiently with a pre-conceived purpose.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia proceeds from a marginal situation to a more dominant and powerful condition towards the later part (Act IV) of the play. She is marred by the contest framed by her father in determining the correct selection of a man to be eligible of being her husband. She is 'not solely led by the nice direction of a maiden's eyes' to choose her husband. Her autonomy to decide the future of her marital life has been subdued by the will of her father to which her attendant Nerissa gives a consoling support by assuring the positive consequences of the 'good inspirations' of her 'virtuous' father on the final selection of her husband. Is it worthwhile to say that being 'virtuous' certifies a person to influence major decisions? If that is the predicament, then Portia's virtues do reward her the autonomy in opinion-formation when she has influence someone else's life and restore life for someone, particularly Antonio, in freeing him from the sinister clutches of Shylock. The necessary conventions of a faithful wife and her role in a marital relationship have been discussed in the context of Lady Macbeth's role. But when the matter is to select a partner for life, any person deserves the right to exercise choice with due discretion. In the structure of a social set-up pursuing a hitherto patriarchal norm, the onus of 'choice' is relegated to the male voice. Portia's case is no exception when she admits with a sense of resignation –

> …O me, the word "choose"! I may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike… [Act I, sc. ii, 22-23]

So, she has to silently resent the fact that 'the will of a living daughter [is] curbed by the will of a dead father.' Considered rash, impractical and impulsive by nature, women in Elizabethan England had been discouraged from taking 'important' and rather influential decisions whether associated with family, society or even personal. The option of absolute agreement with decisions formulated and dictated by a male voice whether in the form of a father, brother, husband or even son, had to be entertained without any scope for reservations. Wifely inferiority would sequentially follow the marginalized position a maiden had to adopt within her family, whether upper class or the lower sections. Admitting his familiarity with such constraints of his contemporary society, Shakespeare has however given the necessary intellectual power to Portia by making her express philosophical ideas and reiterating them in Nerissa's presence. In spite of the perceptible grandeur of her words, Portia has to admit that she is 'to term in gross, is an unlessson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised.' Thus education not being a feminine prerogative or a pre-requisite, the possible implication was that the Elizabethan women carved out for themselves a further fragile and unaccomplished image, grossly incapable of decision-making. With Bassanio emerging as the most suitable match for Portia, entirely because he chose the accurate casket, Portia has to 'convert' the ownership over herself and her property to his ownership. These developments eventually constrict the scope of autonomy that a woman might have possibilities of possessing.

A more worthwhile role is given to Portia in the developments leading to the famous Trial Scene of the play where the innate and unrecognized qualities of intellect and logical reasoning are revealed. She has studied the laws and prepared herself in the most befitting manner to face any

challenge to the contrary which might posed from Shylock's side. It is here that the master stroke of Shakespeare that enables the emergence of a dormant intellectual and logical potential from underneath a docile and submissive feminine exterior.

Portia's success as a character is evaluated from the element of 'fullness' which is evident in her portrayal (Verity 20). In Verity's opinion, quite apart from the extremities of excesses which occur in other characters, Portia's character is all in the mean. In this regard, it would be valid to illustrate the verbal applause given to her in recognition of her uniqueness –

> With all her mental ability, Portia is free from pedantry. She does not pose at all as one who is superior to those around her; she has too much modesty, too keen a sense of humour; she keeps the charm of an "unlesson'd girl" (III.2.159), without any to the self-consciousness and affectation that sometimes accompany cleverness (Verity 21).

There is no denying the fact that in the upcoming scenes of the play she combines soundness of judgment with sensible perception of situations employing remarkable effectiveness in setting of superior strategies. In the Trial scene she assumes the responsibility of accepting a challenging role of subduing the claims of Shylock and changing the course of the trial towards an initially unthinkable direction, which she does under a male disguise. Shylock, who seems to be almost insurmountable throughout the trial and with whom other characters (the Duke, Bassanio and even Antonio) deal rather 'summarily', is defeated by Portia's setting forth of her power of eloquence, perhaps initially with an intention to transform his heart and strike the assumedly minute streaks of softness in it. She makes use of all possible ways to confound him and at every moment, when the situation appears to supersede her control, she employs conciliatory, psychological and legally sterner strategies to make Shylock realize that the laws of Venice are powerful enough to combat the garb of logistics that he has wrought to justify his devilish intentions. Her reasoning with Shylock on the "quality of mercy" (IV.1.82-200) substantiates the procedure adopted by her to assert her autonomy in deciding the conclusion of the trial. Although the final statement in this scene is the harsh pronouncement of the practical scope of Venetian law, whatever she says or does is a perfect reconciliation of justice and mercy. One has to appreciate the gravity and validity of every argument presented by her because through them she restores the authentic and socially beneficial purpose of law. The 'joyous brilliance of manner and speech (Verity 22)' which we find in her, bestows the element of versatility on her, be it in the hitherto comic environment of the ring-episode, the serious and suspense-ridden setting of the court or even the emotionally saturated situation of the casket-scene. Her forcefulness and modesty with determination and exquisite equipoise of mood emerge as decisive in making her carve for herself a powerful role in the play. Thus in the words of Jameson –

> There is a commanding grace, a high-bred elegance, a spirit of magnificence in all that she [Portia] says or does, as one to whom splendour has been familiar from her very birth. [*Characteristics of Women*]

Elizabethan England considered women to fit into certain stock-in-trade roles ranging from a faithful wife, to a chaste and docile maiden and often a lenient mother. In all such roles the assertion of male supremacy remained quite evident and noteworthy. The different types of social restrictions in almost every tangible sphere of practical life further contracted the scope of feminine autonomy. Therefore, if plays were to present slices of life, they had to undoubtedly conform to this non-egalitarian social framework. Romantic comedies have however given an opportunity to Shakespeare to subvert such socially transmitted roles and offer individualistic

and powerful women characters. In spite of the facts that critics have alleged Shakespeare's recourse to the device of cross-dressing in his comedies to relegate women to more decisive roles, the attempt is undeniably successful. We still find an appreciable list of illustrious female characters in Rosalind, Celia or even Viola. They challenge the validity of those social norms which were acceptable to Shakespeare's contemporary society. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind's decision to defy the authority of Duke Frederick and move into the Forest of Arden dressed 'like a man' opens up the occurrence of a sequence of events fundamental to the plot. She assures Celia of her plans to 'have a swashing and a martial outside' to conceal the 'hidden woman's fear' underneath as the inevitability of 'beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold' (I.iii.115-128) is undeniable. If social decadence infringes upon the safety of women and patriarchal notions continue to underestimate their intellectual possibilities then the device of cross-dressing is the only safer option available. The conflicts arising out of the disguised roles of Ganymede and Aliena adopted by Rosalind and Celia are later resolved when true identities are revealed after the authenticity of professed love is proved. In the context of the major women characters, the decision of cross-dressing although taken by them individually, is the outcome of a proper consideration of the challenges to personal safety and position pertaining to these women. Without the disguise of a 'Doctor of Law' Portia couldn't have created the requisite influence in the Trial Scene. Similarly, Rosalind would have remained incapable of either protecting herself from the disgrace of banishment or finding the most appropriate marital partner in Orlando. Thus, these concerns are vital in their respective contexts apart from the fact that they subvert the accompanying gender roles and problematize the conventional compartmentalization of masculine and feminine behaviour. Rosalind finds it cumbersome to recuperate with the difficulties involved in maintaining the conventional male gestures of courage and hardihood with a female heart prone to the influence or subtle and profound emotions.

Through the character of Rosalind, Shakespeare succeeds in subverting the tradition of courtly love, even within the gamut of a play. Rosalind is made to resist this restrictive tradition of inflated idealization and its eulogizing of the mistress, by calling Orlando's carving of the name 'Rosalind' on barks of trees as an abuse [to her name]. She is able to do so only because she is Ganymede. And as Ganymede she plays the sport of pretending to be Rosalind and trains Orlando in the process of wooing one's lady-love. Her decision to impersonate as Ganymede facilitates for her a free movement along the divided patterns of male and female behaviour. This makes her position dynamic in nature and offers her a critical angle to consider her own static and passive role as 'Rosalind'. In this regard, it would be justified to agree with Juliet Dusinberre's view that "Rosalind finds herself in a script supplied by men which she rewrites as the play progresses. She becomes, more than any other heroine, the author of her own drama" (46-49).

The reference to Shakespeare's England as Elizabethan England categorically reveals the most supreme position of a woman in politics. The initial English attitude towards Queen Elizabeth I when she ascended the throne can best be illustrated with a line from a pamphlet by John Knox entitled *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* which states – "it is more than a monster in nature that a woman shall reign and have empire above man" (3-4). Conventionally, early modern England considered women and politics as two grossly incompatible entities. Even till the recent twentieth century, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher owned a series of nicknames conferred on her by the media and her parliamentarian

colleagues – an indication of general vexation at a woman who occupies a position in the male world of politics. In Shakespearean canon, if female warriors of the English history plays are feisty caricatures confined to rhetorical gesture and wishful thinking, in the mature Roman tragedies they have considerable charisma in public life (Maguire 158-9). Antony tries to 'break off' from the enchanting influence of Cleopatra whose glory is only virtually luminous to eclipse his grandeur. In spite of being a powerful monarch, Cleopatra is portrayed as emotionally vulnerable. She becomes a familiar figure through her follies and inconsistencies. Her references to Antony's former wives Fulvia and Octavia in her conversations is an indication that she is aware of the preference she is likely to expect from Antony. Cleopatra's role is complicated by her strategic concerns and not her honest intentions with which she seeks to approach Antony but eventually 'abandons pretense when the lovers finally come together (162)'. In spite of being in a politically potent position, Cleopatra does nothing decisive and influential either in love or in politics. The play is thus appraised as an experimental attempt where the major female character possesses only partial autonomy over her instinctual behaviour but not over the chain of events in the play. And examination into the stages in Cleopatra's progress towards suicide reveals that prior to the play's climactic turn, she has pursued 'infinite conclusions of easy ways to die' (Ridley xIi). Her self-ordained decision of self-annihilation is brought about by the necessity or desirability of a strong compulsion. However, she still moves through a series of contemplative moments of philosophical reflections before arriving towards a final decision. Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra as a subtly penetrating and unsparing character by the end of the play (Ridley xIii). She has been critically acclaimed as 'a brilliant antithesis', 'bundle of contradictions' and yet a 'courtesan of genius'. No doubt that she maintains her royal dignity as a character of remarkable strategic amplitude.

Shakespeare's women characters portray a unique quality of self-determination as they assert their dignity through the control wielded by them within the structure of the plays. Whether as transvestites cross-dressed and disguised caricatures (not in the derogatory sense) or royal personages, they spread their glamour, charm, dexterity, ingenious eloquence and empowering influences. They combat with male characters, nurture and initiate them, twist their pronouncements and even outshine them. Thus, as a visionary, Shakespeare could create a world in his plays as an ideological antithesis to the rigours of his contemporary male-centred society by giving a voice of autonomy to women hitherto considered as marginal.

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