

DENATURALIZING SHAKESPEARE: A FEMINIST APPRAISAL OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA AND TAMING OF THE SHREW

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that despite reflecting the age-old man-made ideas about race, gender, female sexuality and power, Shakespeare's plays suggest themselves to be at odds with patriarchal gender assumptions. The chosen protagonists, Cleopatra and Katherine do not exhibit the traditionally expected code of female behaviour. Both of them are strong women who dare to defy the existing norms and stand out prominently in their own spheres. As a result they have to suffer a reputation and are called names by the male characters. But despite all this, it is to Shakespeare's credit that he shows their intellectual superiority and position of power in the plays. This paper aims to explore the extent to which Shakespeare shared the gender assumptions of his own times and the ways in which his plays give a different perspective to these values and principles. An attempt will be made to examine how gender based societal norms and values have been denaturalized by a proto-feminist Shakespeare.

"Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior; she can do away with this inferiority, only by destroying the male's superiority."- Simone de Beauvoir.

William Shakespeare is a writer far ahead of his times. Where on the one hand, his plays reflect and at times support the patriarchal mindset; on the other hand, they also question that very tradition that helped evolve such repressive norms. By reading Shakespeare, we get a better idea of the Renaissance society and culture and also get a chance to question our own notions of the gender specifics involved in the roles played by people in society.

Shakespearean plays received royal audience fairly often and the personality and aura surrounding Queen Elizabeth may have influenced the characterization of his female protagonists, particularly Cleopatra. Shakespeare shows how each gender possesses both masculine and feminine traits, a combination clearly evident in Queen Elizabeth, a powerful female sovereign ruling with an iron hand over a staunchly patriarchal society. Elizabeth was definitely a female at odds with the patriarchal gender assumptions. She cleverly used her propaganda machine to acquire the image of the virgin queen and did not shy away from a display of anger and even violence when needed.

The fate of most of Shakespeare's female characters, like Kate, Desdemona, Ophelia, Cordelia and Cleopatra present an excellent paradigm of male dominance. All of these figures are victims of a patriarchal society where women have always had to toe the line to avoid being labeled. The Elizabethans regarded men as belonging to a privileged and higher, more favored stratum of society. Women were relegated to playing more subservient roles where marriage would be the ultimate goal. As Valerie Traub suggests in her essay, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare":

"The beginning of an understanding of gender and sexuality during Shakespeare's life is the patriarchal household. Patriarchy in the late sixteenth century referred to the power of the father over all members of his household not only his wife and children, but servants or apprentices. The father was likened to the ruler of the realm, and a well-ordered household was supposed to run like a well ordered state. Early modern culture was resolutely hierarchical, with women, no matter what their wealth or rank, theoretically under the rule of men. Because women generally were believed to be less rational than men, they were deemed to need male protection. Legally, a woman's identity was subsumed under that of her male

protector; as a 'feme covert', she had few legal or economic rights."

(Traub 129-130)

Traub further says, "This position of inferiority required women to strive for four virtues: obedience, chastity, silence and piety." (Traub, 130). These "virtues" firmly placed men in a position of power and dominance. Even in today's world, patriarchy asserts itself through language. But over the years, women have been successful in subverting the very constraints of male domination by skillful use of their wit and intellect. As noted by many feminist writers and thinkers, particularly Emily Dickinson, speech is a powerful weapon for women. The patriarch knows that the best way to subdue or subordinate a woman is to deprive her of the use of this tool. So whenever a Kate speaks out her mind, she is labeled as a *shrew*. A very beautiful, yet intelligent woman like Cleopatra is perceived as a threat to male superiority and thus labeled a *whore*.

This essay will endeavor to argue that despite reflecting the age-old man-made ideas about race, gender, female sexuality and power, Shakespeare's plays suggest themselves to be at odds with patriarchal gender assumptions. This paper aims to explore the extent to which Shakespeare shared the gender assumptions of his own times and the ways in which his plays give a different perspective to these values and principles. An attempt will be made to examine how gender based societal norms and values have been denaturalized by a proto-feminist Shakespeare.

The chosen protagonists, Cleopatra and Katherine, do not exhibit the traditionally expected code of female behavior. Both of them are strong women who dare to defy the existing norms and stand out prominently in their own spheres. As a result they have to suffer a reputation and are called names by the male characters. But despite all this, it is to Shakespeare's credit that he shows their intellectual superiority and position of power in the plays.

Shakespeare did not have an explicitly feminist manifesto neither was he clearly conscious of any such agenda. Even Virginia Woolf was thrown over by his ambiguity when she said, "it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women".(Woolf, 97) His plays give the feel of a very democratic spirit as his women are subject to the same 'dimensions, senses, affections, passions'

as men. According to Harold Bloom, "Shakespeare, as we learn always, does not let us see whether he himself prefers one side or the other" (Hopkins 149) rather he "only suggests by 'delicately balancing one fact, one image, one point of view against another, and invit[es] us to judge and assess.'" (Hopkins 149). Most of Shakespeare's heroines are an anachronism since they are courageous, outspoken and defiant, thus shattering the image of the stereotypical female. Women like Cleopatra who refused to bow down to such pressures met a tragic fate while Kate survives, as the former tried to rule over and control some force far greater and superior than her while the latter knew that an apparent show of submissive attitude is necessary to finally have her way in a male world, that in order to claim a voice and tell the truth to other women it is imperative that she 'tell[s] it slant'.

Antony and Cleopatra

Prof. John Bean and Rosalie (Kit) Bean mention in a handout given in a workshop on critical thinking, conducted by them:

"Renaissance anti-feminist writers typically use the Genesis story of Adam and Eve to justify male authority over women. We saw this rhetorical strategy in Kate's last speech..., and we have read about it in Simkin's overview of the Renaissance social context: "It was assumed to be part of the natural order that men were superior to women...The story of Adam and Eve was also taken as a warning about women's seductive and deceitful nature, and the consensus was that they [women] were to be kept under close surveillance"

This 'seductive and deceitful nature' is in abundant display in the characterization of Cleopatra, but on close reading, it becomes obvious that Shakespeare is using her to expose the patrilinear structures of power. Shakespearean critic Mark Van Doren observes, "Pompey credits the Queen with sultry powers that keep the brain of her lover fuming, but the love *we see* [sic] is light with jest and mellow with amusement." (Doren, 236). Cleopatra is a majestic queen and a beautiful woman, charming enough to win the hearts of the two most powerful Roman leaders of the time, vis-à-vis, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Her god-like magnificence is amply reflected in the eyes of even those who despise her for her sexual powers over Antony.

Shakespeare quotes directly from North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives* when Enobarbus recounts his first sight of Cleopatra:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
 Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were love-sick with them; the oars
 were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggar'd all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion--cloth-of-gold of tissue--
 O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling
 Cupids,
 With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did

(II, ii, 192-205)

This deification, according to Ania Loomba, echoes the "attempts to depict Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen, which fixed her visually as a goddess and served to fill the iconographic vacuum created by the exit of Catholicism. Elizabeth needed, however, to reinforce her power by negating her femininity; she could only secure her status as ruler by 'transcending' the limitations of her sex, i.e. by repudiating it: 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king of England too.' (Heisch, 'Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy', p.55) Cleopatra similarly asserts:

"A charge we bear i'th war,
 And as president of my kingdom, will
 Appear there for a man." (III.vii.16-18)"

(Loomba, 76)

Shakespeare went to some lengths in his delineation of Cleopatra. She has been portrayed in the most 'subtle yet formidable' way. "Of Shakespearean representations of women, Cleopatra's is the most subtle and formidable, by universal consent. The audience is given an enigmatic range of possible judgments and interpretations." (Bloom 546). The text describes

this Egyptian queen as a 'gypsy whore' but also as a 'wonderful piece of work'. On the surface, it may seem as if it is the patriarchal mindset which made Shakespeare portray Cleopatra as one who has the 'power to unman men', thus posing a real threat to 'male power and authority'. Ania Loomba asserts that, "It is visually expressed by the images of cross-dressing. More generally, this ties in with the usurping of male positions by any disorderly woman: Philo, in the opening lines talks of Antony, 'the triple pillar of the world transform'd/into a strumpet's fool' (I.i.12-13). In the next scene Antony sees his great love as bondage: 'These strong Egyptian fetters I must break/Or lose myself in dotage' (I.ii.113-14) Caesar too refers to the relationship as a reversal of gender roles:

...he fishes, drinks and wastes
 The lamps of the night in revel; is not more
 manlike
 Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy
 More womanly than he. (I.iv.4-7)"

(Loomba 78)

She is a heroine who is referred to variously as the lustful 'gypsy', a 'wrangling queen', a 'slave', an 'Egyptian dish' and a 'whore'. She is also the enchantress who has made Antony 'the noble ruin of her magic' (III.x.18). We see Cleopatra lashing out in anger at the messenger from Rome, violently striking him for bringing the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia. She is also depicted as a far-sighted politician who indulges in deceit and betrays her lover for the sake of her country. Thus, she displays qualities which were considered very 'unnatural' in a woman. It was believed that a 'natural' woman is domestic and passive and that political self-interest, violence and greed are masculine traits. Cleopatra's display of rage and violence could be representative of a system that equates power with violence. According to Claire McEachern in her essay, "Fathering Herself: A source study of Shakespeare's Feminism":

"Pioneering feminist forays into Shakespeare's canon, while seeking to 'compensate for the bias in a critical tradition that has tended to emphasize male characters, male themes, and male fantasies as well as to develop a uniquely feminist criticism capable of searching out 'the woman's part' discovered in Shakespeare an apparent commitment to the portrayal of liberated female characters, strong in voice and action."

Far from marginalizing the female, Shakespeare here, clearly interrogates the patriarchal structure. Due to his artistry in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the portrait that emerges is that of a powerful queen. He cleverly dismisses the earlier sources which fuel the anti-feminist sentiments by portraying a very negative picture of Cleopatra and turns to Plutarch's *Lives*, which was translated by Thomas North in 1579, for his source material where Cleopatra is depicted in a more humane way. Plutarch speaks not just of her physical beauty and the charisma she exuded, but also mentions the powerful personality and intelligent and persuasive manner of her conversation which had a mesmeric effect on anyone who was fortunate enough to be in her presence. He also mentions that Cleopatra knew many languages and thus had an advantage over her male counterparts who would rely on interpreters to communicate with the Egyptians. Plutarch has used Cleopatra as a foil to Antony, but Shakespeare goes a step further and portrays a fully developed character, who, as the title suggests, shares the limelight with Antony. She is a victimized heroine of tragic proportions. Shakespeare gives her magnificent lines to suit her greatness and her status of the Queen. She uses the very weapons of patriarchy—language and reason—to assert her femininity. Like a true leader, she displays great wit and presence of mind in critical situations and is endowed with the leadership quality to make quick decisions as she did in her retreat. There is a considerable debate among historians regarding the retreat of her naval fleet. Some say it was an act of betrayal, others think it might have been a deliberate plan between Antony and Cleopatra. Shakespeare, on the other hand, draws the picture of a person who was endowed with great political foresight and knew how disastrous it would be to forge ahead and lock horns with Octavius Caesar who had the reputation of possessing a miraculously good luck as opposed to Antony. So she decides to retreat displaying very good sense. After Antony's defeat, Cleopatra is realistic and pragmatic enough to acknowledge Caesar's victory:

He is a god, and knows
 What is more right.
 Mine honor was not yielded,
 But conquered merely.

(III, xiii, 58-60)

Since Cleopatra is a historical figure, Shakespeare could not have written a different ending to her

story, but the point to be noted is that how within his limitations, Shakespeare has portrayed her. The ever disdainful and proud queen absolutely refuses to be paraded on the streets of Egyptian cities as a slave, where she had once ruled as a queen. Rather than submit to such abject degradation, she chooses to embrace death. Even the manner in which Shakespeare has portrayed her death is striking in its grandeur. Cleopatra wished to be remembered by posterity and the Egyptians believed that dying from snakebite brings immortality. So she puts on her royal robes and crown before setting an asp on her body and gains everlasting immortality by embracing death by snakebite. Harold Bloom quotes Janet Adelman who finds in Cleopatra, Shakespeare's reimagining of the female mystery of an endlessly regenerating source of supply, growing the more it is reaped (Bloom, 565) "She is raised to be an apotheosis after Antony breaks apart. He ceases to be a god, and then she becomes one."

(Bloom, 546).

Taming of the Shrew

Women speak two languages -- one of which is verbal.-

- Steve Rubinstein

The Elizabethan theater-goers were familiar with the anonymous ballad, *A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife Lapped in Morel's Skin for Her Good Behavior* (1550). Shakespeare while adapting the available tradition chose to ignore the methods used by the husband in that ballad to 'tame' his wife. The husband in the ballad beats his wife; Petruccio is more of a humanist who believes in being gentle yet firm. Shakespeare does not endorse the popularly held Elizabethan view that a husband can beat his wife. His methods are more subtle and psychological. Petruccio fights 'poison with poison'. "He pretends to have the same sort of bad temper that she has, and he behaves with a wanton capriciousness that out-Kates Kate." (Harbage, p.80). This is an act that he puts on for Kate so that she realizes that he loves her no matter what and that she can let her defences down with him at least. Shakespeare uses Petruccio, Katherine and even Sly to show how this hierarchy of power is a farce and can be manipulated to achieve one's purposes. By referring to the play as a "commodity" and by misunderstanding "stuff" as household stuff, Sly unintentionally gives the message that the play is not just a commodity itself,

but is also about the commodification of women. During the course of the play we see how Kate is called names like devil, wench, a fiend of hell, a rotten apple, a thing to be boarded, an irksome brawling scold, a wild cat etc. Katherine, labeled as a shrew, is a headstrong and intelligent girl who knows what she wants from life. So Petruccio openly states his intention of subduing her spirits and says:

For I am he born to tame you, Kate,
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate
Conformable as other household Kates.
(II, i, 278-80)

Thus she is snubbed by being referred to as a creature that needs to be tamed. She rebels against her father's wish to marry her off to a man of his choice, as was the norm. Baptista's action exhibits the patriarchal power-play where fathers chose the son-in-law to continue domination in some way. Choosing a husband is a way of the father (male), exercising one last form of control and domination over the daughter (female) before relinquishing her to another male. Kate refuses to comply or conform and the only way she finds to assert herself is through the so called shrewish behavior. She does not meet the renaissance requirement of the truly feminine, as she does not exhibit the values they demanded. Kate displays no artificial conformation to society. She certainly does not possess the virtues of *obedience*, *silence*, *piety*, *humility*, *constancy*, and *patience*. This theme of subjugation is introduced effectively in the Induction scene through the figure of Sly who is as much in the position of a subordinate as Kate. Sly's change in status from a lowly tinker to that of a lord foreshadows Kate's own improved position later.

Shakespeare sketches this character as a bold and intelligent girl who is an equal partner in conversation with Petruccio. Wit, sincerity, frankness and intelligence are the hallmarks of her speech. She is clever enough to retort to Petruccio:

Moved? In good time: let him that moved you
hither
Remove you hence. I knew you at the first,
You were a movable.
(II, I, 195-97)

But unfortunately, in the renaissance context, her outspokenness and her fiery character do not match with her dependent situation. Providentially, she

falls in love as she, at last, finds someone caring enough to show her that a constantly bad and shrewish behavior i.e., loud and obvious opposition, only adds to failure to attain what you want and can only be a harbinger of misery and a bad reputation. Many feminist critics are of the opinion that the marriage took place against the wishes of Kate, but I agree with Harold bloom, when he asserts:

"Petruccio is accurate when he insists that Kate fell in love with him at first sight. How could she not? Badgered into violence and vehemence by her dreadful father Baptista, who vastly prefers the authentic shrew, his insipid younger daughter Bianca, the high-spirited Kate desperately needs rescue. The swaggering Petruccio provokes a double reaction in her: outwardly furious, inwardly smitten."

(Bloom 29)

The idea that Kate is in love, is easily reinforced on her wedding day when Petruccio's arrival is delayed. She suffers deep emotional hurt and fears that he may have changed his mind. She complains that he probably has no intention to marry her:

He'll woo a thousand, 'point the day of
marriage,
Make friends, invite, and proclaim the banns,
Yet never means to wed where he hath wooed.

Shakespeare hastens to show that she wants to be married, but not mastered:

I see a woman may be made a fool
If she had not a spirit to resist
(II, ii, 216-17)

And this enables her to rank with men who are wary of marriage as something that takes away their freedom. Once married, Petruccio embarks on his mission to 'tame' Katherine. At the very outset, he stubbornly refuses to furnish her with the very things a newly married girl would wish for: fine clothes and ornaments, and deprives her of food to break down her defenses. He then gives her the task to address an old man, Vincentio, as if he were a beautiful, young girl! She does so, but is instantly reprimanded by Petruccio who asserts that men should not be addressed using terms such as 'faire', 'sweet', and 'lovely', endorsing Hortensio who had declared, "A will make the man mad to make the

woman of him”-(IV,v,35). Shakespeare’s audience is used to watching plays where male actors played the role of female characters and the dramatist uses these sexual overlaps to drive home his point that it is ridiculous to treat men and women so differently!

Finally Katherine buys freedom from patriarchal domination by acquiescing not submitting when she made her notoriously famous “Submission Speech” as some critics like to call it. She proclaims:

“Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman 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?
(V, ii, 160-65)

This speech has been denounced by many feminists, but according to Karen Newman’s critique, “The Taming of the Shrew: A Modern Perspective”, Kate’s speech “must be understood ironically as pretense, a strategy for living peaceably in patriarchal culture” (233). In a society dominated and ruled by men it is only natural for a woman to seek a ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ mentality for the sake of merely living another day, even if it requires giving in to her husband’s humbling requests. Kate declares:

And be it moon or sun or what you please.
An if you please to call it a rush-candle,
Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me.

She does this to get what she wants and in this case it is to proceed to Padua for her sister’s wedding. Kate agrees to call the sun, the moon, even though it most clearly is not. This speech highlights how Kate has matured and developed an understanding of the ways of the world. She does what is expedient in order to humor Petruccio. But the dramatist himself is ambiguous in his conclusion. He suggests domestic harmony in an equivocal manner. It is a very paradoxical situation where submission translates into power. It is authority and power in a different and more harmonious spirit.

According to Michel Foucault, “[p]ower must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a

chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands” (98). By taking centre stage Kate commands a position of power now, not one of subjugation. Karen Newman in her essay on *Taming of the Shrew* says:

“...the shrew both demonstrated and helped the patriarchal social formation that characterized Elizabethan England, but representation gives us a perspective on that system that subverts its status as natural. The theatrically constructed frame in which Sly exercises patriarchal power and the dream in which Kate is tamed undermines the seemingly eternal nature of those structures by calling attention to the constructed character of the representation rather than veiling it through mimesis...Kate would have been played by a boy whose transvestism...emblematically embodied the sexual contradictions manifest both in the play and Elizabethan culture. The very indeterminateness of the actor’s sexuality... foregrounds its artifice and therefore subverts the play’s patriarchal master narrative by exposing it as neither natural nor divinely ordained, but culturally constructed.”
(42, 49-50)

Modern feminist productions of the *Taming of the Shrew* have played the “Submission Speech” as a joke. But that is an interpretation not justified by the play text. So, while there is no doubt that Katherine is subjected to powers of male domination and made to realize the ‘naturalness’ of patriarchy, it is also true that Shakespeare clearly favors her when he makes her wield back an irreducible force of her own, completely turning the tables on Petruccio who had earlier subverted her individuality, her very identity by referring to her as:

“...my goods, my chattels. She is my house,
My household-stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything”
(III, ii, 226-28)

However, now she holds sway over him and allows him to swagger while she has the reins of the household and the marriage firmly in her control. It is accomplished as she learns to discipline herself and the audience realize that she is truly capable of making a strong, safe and happy place for herself in the society where, in contrast to her earlier, less privileged position of a subjugated daughter and a

single woman, now as a wife, she is in a better position to speak out and convey her message to other women.

Conclusion

“To talk about Shakespeare’s women is to talk about his men, because he refused to separate their worlds physically, intellectually, or spiritually. Where in every other field understanding of Shakespeare’s art grows, reactions to his women continually recycle, because critics are still immersed in preconceptions which Shakespeare discarded about the nature of women.”

(Dusinberre 308)

Shakespeare successfully upholds humanistic ideals by endowing Kate and Cleopatra with the attributes of intelligence, rationality, enigmatic beauty and talent. His female protagonists can be considered to be the prototypes of modern women in their ability to meet men in their own territory and match if not excel in the use of wit, intelligence and talent to get ahead in the race of life. Shakespeare is not just another patriarchal bard. There is definitely a method to his madness. He rises above the stereotypical portrayal of women and challenges the cultural mores by rejecting the traditional sources for his plays. This is accomplished by giving a fresh and new interpretation to the ones he selects. Patriarchy for his women has restrictive, coercive connotations. He invites his readers to scrutinize the emotions at play behind the actions, thus exposing a whole new dimension. Subjugated and repressed women with bad reputations are actually revealed as the true heroes, the really powerful individuals. They successfully stand out in the crowd as Empowered Heroines, the forerunners of the successful and emancipated modern women.

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